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AVRAM DAVIDSON'S NEW NOVEL: The Phoenix and the Mirror

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AVRAM DAVIDSON'S NEW NOVEL: THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR

CLIFFORD D. SIMAK
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Cover: Betelgeuse in Orion
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FANTASTIC, Vol. 15, No. 5, May, 1966, is published bi-monthly by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc., Editorial and subscription office Box 7, Oakland Gardens, Flushing, N.Y., 11364. Business office: Purchase, N.Y., Box 175 Portchester, N.Y., at 50¢ a copy. Subscription rates: One year (6 issues) United States and possessions \$2.50; Canada and Pan American Union countries \$3.00, all other countries \$3.50 Second Class Postage paid at Flushing, N.Y., and at additional mailing office. Copyright 1966 by Ultimate Publishing Co., Inc. All rights reserved. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care, however, publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Editorial

Quite a while ago we had an experience that must be typical of what most veteran readers of s-f and fantasy went through, at one time or another, back in the days when science fiction had yet to win the qualified "respectability" that has rubbed off from exploding atoms and men walking in space. On this occasion, a new acquaintance of the family happened to spot us intently reading a copy of the old *Thrilling Wonder Stories*. He glanced at the cover—a Bergey girl and a lascivious Bug-Eyed-Monster struggling on some airless asteroid—wrinkled his brow and asked, with a mixture of awe and derision, "You don't actually *believe* that stuff, do you?" And before we could think of one of the set replies that all of us learned to have ready for just such occasions, he stalked out of the room and we never saw him again. But probably to this day he may still be wondering if people like us actually do *believe* in Bug-Eyed-Monsters, airless asteroids, and pretty girls in transparent spacesuits.

Naturally, what caught us off guard for the moment was not any embarrassment about the sexy cover but his puzzling use of the word *believe*. Of course,

if he had bothered to stay, we would have pointed out that no one—except children and madmen—actually believes that fiction is fact, that an imaginary story should ever be mistaken for reality itself. And just as naturally he would have denied that he ever meant the word in *that* sense at all, and gone on to qualify his original question to something like: "You don't actually *pretend* to believe in that stuff, do you?"

And to that, after thinking about it a bit, we probably would have admitted that, yes, that's exactly what we do when we read an s-f or fantasy story. From the first word to last, we make-believe that "external" events—the scenes in the story—are happening. And the better written the story, the more easily we forget that it really *is* just make-believe and not the reality we're used to most of the time—such as the kind that's snowing on the windowpane as these lines are being written.

To that our inquisitor might very well have admitted that, on occasion, he too had played the Game of Fiction, had—for a free hour or so—enjoyed a good story about war or love, had paid closer

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About a decade ago Anthony Boucher noted that no Avram Davidson story was very much like any other Avram Davidson story—an astute and typically graceful tribute to one of the most versatile writers in the field. And now that we've seen such recent top-flight novels as *Rogue Dragon* and *Masters of the Maze*, we're also beginning to notice that no Davidson novel is very much like any other Davidson novel, especially "*The Phoenix and the Mirror*," which poses a dilly of a question: How do you make a mirror that has never reflected anything? No, not anything—not even the tormented face of Vergil the Magus, who must make just such a mirror or else remain less than a man—for good!

THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR

BY AVRAM DAVIDSON

Illustrated by GRAY MORROW

AUTHOR'S NOTE: During the Middle Ages a copious and curious group of legends became associated with the name of Vergil, attributing to the author of *The Aeneid* and *The Georgics* all manner of heroic, scientific, and magical powers—to such an extent, indeed, that most of the world forgot that Vergil had been a poet, and looked upon him as a nigromancer, or sorcerer. From the Dark Ages to the Ren-

ascence the popular view of the ancient world as reflected in the *Vergilean Legends* was far from the historical and actual one in more than the acceptance of legend and magic and myth. It is a World of Never-Never, and yet it is a world true to its own curious lights—a backward projection of medievalism, an awed and confused transmogrification of quasi-forgotten ancient science, a world which slumbered

much—but whose dreams were far from dull. Such is the setting of THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR. It is projected as part of a series, the entire corpus to be known as VERGILMAGUS; and, though inspired by the Medieval tales about him, it is not—though future parts may be—based on any of them.

Chapter I

He had long ago lost his way in this vast, vaulted labyrinth, and the manticores, seeming to sense this, began to draw closer. He could smell the strong, bitter stink of them; could hear the guttural, gobbling noises which passed for speech among them. From high overhead at regular intervals slotted shafts of light came through the grates. The man looked back, without pausing, and saw the manticores—as they came to the diffused well of sunlight—divide into two groups and sidle, single-file, along the walls... whispering, slithering, scuttling noises... scrabble of claws: click-click-click...

The manticores abhorred the light.

He pressed on.

To move faster might prove fatal. So far they had not come to deciding on a rush. The awe of men (along with the hate of men, one of their seemingly instinctive characteristics) still held



them from it. He walked along as steadily as if he were passing through the streets of Naples — and some of them were darker, even, than this; and some of them were not even as wide — and some of them, even, though not many, were almost as unsafe.

Behind him, just as steadily, came the manticores. In shape they were like great bloated weasels, hair a reddish-yellow for the most part and shaggy as goats, eyes bulging and glowing and rolling every way, showing an intelligence that — for all it differed so incomprehensibly from that of men — was far more than merely animal. Round each neck was a mane like a ruff of clotted plumes, framing a face which might have come from a nightmare—like a human face reduced in size and stretched to distortion: nose broad and flat, eyes narrow, mouth wide, expression hideous.

So as not to attract attention the man did not now raise his head, but lifted up his glance. Whoever had built these great tunnels through which the rains were drained off into the Bay, whether the Titans or the Greeks, the Carthaginians or The Old People of the Land, the Etruscans or whoever (Clemens would know if anyone knew, but Clemens would say only that they were places to be avoided; which was why Clemens was not here) —

they had provided shafts and stairways. If he could manage to find one, if his finding one did not precipitate an attack, if the upper exist was not closed off...

Many such doorways were known to exist. Some would require weeks of work, so firmly had they been sealed off with cement and masonry, with a gorgon's mask of the Sign of Mithras Invictus or some other talisman or apotropos fixed into them. Others were guarded by heavy doors, locked, but keys existed and hinges were well-oiled, in case those who held the gates wanted a quick way out with no necessity of advertising their movements in the streets. And there were, there had to be, other openings of which no man knew...or at least, which no man guarded, either personally or by proxy.

It must have been through one such passage-way that the manticores had come, a century before, and stolen a human child. The raid had been witnessed by the child's mother, who told of it before dying of her tainted wounds, and had passed into legend. So far, though dreadful, it was easy enough to understand. But why had the manticores, instead of killing the child, kept him alive for forty years? And why, then, released him? No one could say, or even conjecture.

Down the center of this arm of

the maze a trickle of water flowed, and it was wet, too, near the mossy walls, from seepage. But there was a dry enough path — in fact, two — one on either side. The man walked down the left hand one. Somewhere, far above, a dog barked. The sounds behind him changed. For an instant the pad-pad ceased. So did the grunting. The dog barked again — then again and again, without stopping. Then it stopped, abruptly, as if someone had commanded it, or thrown a stone.

Another grating was up ahead; like all of them, impossible to climb to unless someone at the surface sent down fathoms and fathoms of knotted rope. Dust motes swam lazily in the bars of light as the man approached, then began to dance in agitation as the manticores broke into a trot. A querulous whine which was almost a question was succeeded by a deep gobble which was almost an answer. The movement was towards his right — they were not going to rush him yet — the intention was evidently to pass him, to cut him off. Knowing what little he did of the manticores, guessing from that little knowledge, the man believed that they would not have chosen this plan unless something favorable to it lay up ahead —

Unless something unusual lay up ahead.

The dog barked again. Or was

it another dog? No — there were two of them, one behind and one before, neither visible, but both in the tunnel.

The manticores broke to a halt. And the man broke into a run.

There it was. A huge projecting leaf of the original rock thrust itself into the corridor, which turned aside to avoid it. The way was only half its usual width here, evidently the passage at this point was merely a fissure in the substratum. It would have been an ideal place for the manticores to hold him at bay. When they saw him run the pack of them began to howl and gobble, but the dogs barked, a man's voice called out, then another, and another. Behind him he could hear his pursuers hesitate.

A dog began to bay in that fashion, half-frenzied, half frightened, which meant it had caught the bitter, pungent scent of the manticores. There was the grating of metal on metal, a loud creaking, a flood of light from high up to one side. A voice called out. The man fled up the damp and shallow steps.

Behind him, as the door was shoved to, locked, bolted, barred, he heard the devilish things below shrieking their frustration and their fury.

Before throwing the bolts, the greybearded man who let him in demanded, "The other men? And the dogs?"

"There is only me. There were no dogs." The place was some sort of grotto. Benches had been hewn out of the rock.

"But I heard," the greybeard insisted. He had a blunt, watchful face. Two dogs barked, one after the other. Men's voices called. The greybeard's eyes swung up to the half-arch of the ceiling, where the voices had seemed to be; swung over to the man he had just admitted.

"Was that what you heard?" the man asked. "Lock your door," he said. The door was duly shut and made secure, huge bolts sliding smoothly into the living rock.

"Filthy creatures," muttered the older man. "'Why doesn't the Doge send men,' I asked, 'thousands of them — armed — with torches—and clean out the conduits once and for all?'" "Because," they told me, 'the manticores have burrows, the ground is riddled with them like an old cheese. That's why,' they told me."

"They told you rightly," the newcomer said, turning to go.

But his rescuer was ahead of him now, blocking the way. "'No man can follow, do you see?'" they told me. 'Hundreds would be lost — never find their way back,' is what they said. 'Best keep out.' Eh?"

The younger man moved past him. "Indeed, yes."

A hand was laid on his shoul-

der, tightened. "Then why were you in the conduits?"

"Because I was a fool." Their eyes locked. The hand took a firmer grip, then relaxed.

"No... You're not a fool. And neither am I. So—" A curious sound came from not far off, like a bird call, but of no bird known. The greybeard removed his hand, placed it flat against the newcomer's back and pushed him firmly ahead. "We'll go and see my lady now," he said. Two half flights of step brought them to the surface. They were in a garden, far too large to be located anywhere within the city. A huge oak wreathed in vines stood not far away, and a row of cypresses marked a path. There was a white froth of almond-blossoms on the trees to his right, and the air was sweet with the scent of them. The curious call sounded again, nearer.

"I am coming, ma'am," the greybeard said. "*We* are coming. 'In the name of Poseidon Horsebreaker,' I asked him, 'why were you down in those daemon-runs?'" "I'm a fool, is why," he said.

A woman's voice said, sharply, "Tulio, be still!"

Tulio's face broke into a broad smile, as if he had been complimented, and he nodded vigorously to the newcomer as if inviting him to share his pleasure. He composed himself as they rounded the great oak, and he

bowed. The woman who sat deep in the shade of the tree had at one time been handsome; that was clear. If she had been beautiful at another period was uncertain. It was sure that she had never been pretty. Behind her, on a slight rise of ground, was a large villa. Servants were behind her chair, crouching at her feet, and on either side; yet she had the air of being quite alone. A golden whistle lay in her lap.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. "What happened? Who are you?"

The man bowed. "I am not hurt, ma'am," he said. "I was lost — pursued — attacked — saved, thanks to your servant. My name is Vergil." He felt the breeze touch the back of his neck and was prepared when the white deerhound, who had been nuzzling the lady's hands, leapt howling to its feet. A deep sound rose from Vergil's throat, and the dog stood back, subsiding, but with its hair still bristling.

"I think that I will stand over here, if I may, ma'am," Vergil said. "The wind brings him the smell of those creatures."

She nodded, abstractedly. "Yes...one gets it sometimes when the air is still and heavy. Earthquake days, or when Vesuvio is about to be angry. A bitter smell, deep and bitter. Foul things, and yet...yet they must have some awareness of beauty, don't you think? They dig up rubies and

emeralds and all such precious stones, and pile them up only to look at them. Or so one hears."

Tulio chuckled. "And so Master Vergil hears, too, ma'am, I dare say — which is perhaps why and how he happened to get lost. Eh, sir?"

Vergil shrugged. The lady said, "Tulio, you are impertinent. Give him refreshment — no, *you*, Tulio." The cheeks above the grey beard were slightly flushed as Tulio took the tray from a silent servant's hand and handed it to Vergil. There was wine, bread, a dish of oil, a dish of honey, soft cheese, a sliced lamprey. He bowed his thanks, poured a libation, began to eat.

"But — were there not others?" the mistress of villa and garden asked. "We heard — it seemed —"

He swallowed a mouthful, took a sip of wine. The air was cool in the shade of the great oak. There were many questions in his mind, but he could wait for the answers. He lifted his head slightly. A man's voice spoke from the top of one of the almond trees. All eyes turned to look. There was no one there, but the voice went on speaking. And then, from the very summit of the oak, a dog barked.

"I see," the lady said. "And I know some little about such matters. This is no mere mountebank's trick." She nodded. Her fingers played on the golden whis-

tle. "I understand, now.

"You are *that* Vergil."

Vergil bowed.

Her deep-set violet eyes gazed at him intently. Her long, white, blue-veined fingers clenched, so that the single ring on them thrust forward its crested signet. "Magus," she said, "will you make a speculum for me?"

"No, madame."

She beat her hands together. "Do you understand me? I mean a speculum of virgin bronze, prepared according to the Great Science which is your art."

The wind had stopped, the air was still. Crouching on the ground behind her lady's seat, holding in one small hand the embroidery ring with long needle thrust through the unfinished design — a bird of strange sort sejant upon a heap — a servant girl looked up at him aslant with red-brown eyes. "I understand you, madame. In theory I can make a virgin speculum. In fact, however, at the present state of things, it is impossible."

The lady gave a gasp of anger and despair. She threw out her hands, opening, somewhat, with the force of the gesture, the carefully-arranged folds of her robe. An inch or two of bordering showed, and—a sudden stroke of light illuminating a corner previously obscured — Vergil now had the key. "Do you know who I am?" the lady cried.

He bowed. "Ma'am, I do. You are the Lady Cornelia, Dowager Queen of Carsus, the near of kin to the Doge of Naples... And it is still impossible."

Queen Cornelia sat up, stiffly. "It must be done, Magus. Or else you will leave here — now — and by the same route you arrived. Choose."

"I should hope, Ma'am," he said, calmly, "that it will not come to that."

The anger ebbed from her face, and was succeeded by the slightest of flushes. "No," she murmured. "No, no... After all, you have eaten my bread. You have drunk my wine."

Something stirred in his mind. "And not only here," he said. "What —?"

He came close, spoke so low that only the two of them could hear. "*I, perishing with thirst, was given to drink of the water of memory. I drank from the cymbal, I ate from the basket.*"

Memory was in her eyes, enlightenment upon her face. She was much younger, he saw now, than she had at first appeared to be. "You have *'seen the sun rise at midnight,'* then," she said. "You have seen the Eleusinian Mysteries. We are brother and sister. We —" She looked about her, hold out her slender hand, and he helped her rise.

"We must speak further, but not here."

They left the oak and the almond tree and passed along the lane of cypress trees to the villa. She still held his hand, did not let it go until they were in a room of darkly gleaming wooden walls, faint and musky the scent of the beeswax polish. Arranged upon them were tapestries rich in crimson and scarlet and purple and gold. She sat upon a couch and he, upon her gesture, knelt beside it on the soft, dyed fleeces.

"Now we are alone," she said, placing her cool fingers against his cheek. "And I do not speak to you as queen to commoner, but as mystagogue to mystagogue. I would speak to you without speech..."

"Yes..."

So low was her voice now that she almost seemed indeed to "speak without speech."—"Like Ceres," she said, "I, too, am a mother. I, too, have a daughter and know not where she is. Ceres learned from Helios, god of the Sun. *I* would learn from the mirror, round as the sun. And if I, too, must search the dark hall of Hell for my daughter, then let Hell itself be harrowed..."

"You do not know the problems involved," he said. "If the speculum can be made at all, it might well take a year to make it. And I have not a year to spare. The task which brought me here today is one which must engage me tomorrow, and for many tomor-

rows after tomorrow; and there are other works of labor, too, which have been too long delayed: they call to me insistently. I cannot, Madame, I cannot, I cannot, not even for the sake of the common and holy bond between us.

"Not even for the Mystery."

There was no trace now of the anger which had come with his previous refusal. The violet-colored eyes were calm, and then they seemed to glow in the dim light with another and deeper emotion. She said, almost in a whisper, "There are other Mysteries besides that one. Have you been at—" She spoke a name, and she spoke another, and then she spoke a third.

"Yes," he said, and his own voice was now but a whisper itself. "Yes...Yes." He was aware, and aware that she was aware, that his answer was assent as well as affirmation. He put his arms around her, and his lips on her lips.

After a moment she said, her words now not even a whisper, but a breath, "Then come, my bridegroom, and let us celebrate the Wedding."

As a great wind shakes the fruit upon the tree, ripe and rich and sweet; as the wind seizes hold of the field of grain, making the full ears tremble and await the harvest; as the wind, strong and tumultuous, drives the ship

ahead of it straight as an arrow towards the harbor—

And then, even as the fire blazed up fiercely upon the hearth, abruptly, terribly abruptly, it vanished. And there was nothing but the cold and the darkness.

Vergil cried out in shock and pain and anguish.

"Where is it?" he cried. "Witch! Sorceress! *Give it back to me!*"

Cornelia laughed softly, gloating. Then, as one cruel child taunts a fellow, she briefly opened the palms of her hands, and instantly closed them again, with an unctuous and evil chuckle of triumph. The swift glimpse showed him the tiniest, naked simulacrum of himself, pale as new ivory, passive as pallid; then, even in that short shaveling of a second, even that ghost of color faded from it. Tiny, translucent, a mere shape, a shadow, a fraction . . .

"*Give it back to me!*" He lunged forward, then fell back with a sudden scream of anguish as she quickly pressed her palms together and, almost contemptuously, watched him slump to the floor.

"Get up," she said, cradling her closed hands between her breasts. "Get up, Vergil the Magus. Then go from here and into your house and begin the work of making the magic mirror, the virgin speculum. You are still

as much magus as ever—"

"You are wrong," he said, dully.

"—even though you are no longer as much man as ever—What? If I am wrong, if you are not as much magus as ever, being no longer a full man, then this is your problem and none of mine. If there are things of science and of sorcery now beyond you, then let this be a goad to your flesh not to slacken in the task I have set for you. Do not think, though, to persuade me that *this* task is one of them. I know better.

"What do you call this which I have and hold? Not the *ka* and not the *ba* and not the —It does not matter. I have the thing and I do not need the name. It is one of your souls; that is enough. Without it you are only part of a man. You will never be complete without it. Do my work, and I return it to you. Refuse—Fail—I destroy it. Tarry—I punish it. Dally—

"But," she said, regarding him without passion and with utter certitude, "I do not think that you will dally.

"No, no, my mage. I do not think that you will dally."

Chapter 2

The Street of the Horse-Jewellers, which lay in the older quarter of Naples, was wider than many

of the streets there. This may have been the reason it harbored the trade for which it was named: Those wanting the ornaments that no horse or mule or ass in Naples was ever seen without required space for their mounts, their teams and wagons, when they had any. There was no place wide enough to turn more than a single horse, not even in the broad place by the Fountain of Cleo, but the Street retained enough width all the way through to drive into Kings Way.

At sunset of the same day on which the Lady Cornelia, in one stroke, had made him less than a man, Vergil approached his house in the heart of that busy quarter. The street hadn't changed very much since the days when, as a young man, he had passed through Naples from his native Brindisi en route to study at the Academy of Illiriodorus in Athens. Nor had he. Though older now, he was still grayhound thin, grey-green of eye, dark of skin, his beard still black as tar.

But as he mounted the steps of his own home on this day, he did so slowly and painfully, not even troubling to glance at the brazen head set into a niche in the wall on the left-hand side, three steps from the bottom. When he trod upon the step level with it, however, the eyes opened, the mouth opened, the head turn-

ed, the mouth spoke.

"Who goes?" it demanded. "Who goes? Who goes?"

"He who made you, goes," the man said; "and will enter."

"Enter, Master," said the brazen head. The door at the top began to open. "Guard me well," said the man, not pausing (but a grimace twisted his face); "as ever." "*Thus I hear and thus I tell and I will ever guard you well. As ever,*" the brazen head replied. The heavy voice seemed to echo somewhere: *ever...ever...ever...ever*. The eyes rolled—right—left—up—down—The mouth muttered a moment more. The mouth closed. The eyes shut.

The man walked down the hall. "My bath," he directed; adding, after a moment, "My dinner." Bells sounded...once...twice...the soft chimes died away. He pressed his palm upon a door showing, in relief, Tubal-Cain working in metals and handing something to an awed Haephestus. The door opened. Somewhere, water had begun to splash. The room was lit by a glowing globe of light upon a pilaster of marble of so dark a green as to be almost black—"dragon green," the Phrygians called it. He moved to the first of the other pilasters which ringed round the room and lifted a casque of black enameled work which fell back on golden hinges, disclosing another glowing globe.

Then a voice came from one side: "I found that too many lights were diffusing the reflections of my inward eye, the one which lies behind my navel, so I covered them."

After a second, the voice said, in a voice of mild surprise, "Greetings, Vergil."

"Greetings, Clemens," Vergil said, continuing his slow round until every light shone unhampered. "I know that very sensitive eye which lies behind your navel. It is not light per se which inflames it, but light which shines through the goblets in which you have captured the fifth essence of wine...before imprisoning it, for greater safety, also behind your navel." He sighed, stepped out of his clothes and into his bath.

The alchemist shrugged, scratched his vast and tangled beard, made rude and visceral noises. "The *quint'essentia* of wine, taken judiciously by a man of superior physique and intelligence — such as myself — can only aid reflection. I must show you some notes pertinent to this point in the commentary I'm making on the works of Galen."

Vergil continued to bathe, all absence of his usual zest in this seeming to escape the alchemist, who suddenly bethought himself of something else and smote the conical felt cap atop his mass of curly hair.

"Vergil! Have you ever heard

of a metal with a melting-point lower than lead?"

Vergil, pausing briefly in his ablutions, said, "No."

"Oh..." Clemens seemed disappointed. He said, "Then it must be an exceptionally pure form of lead, sophically treated to remove the dross. I've seen only a few beads of it, but it melts in the heat of a lamp-wick, and if a drop falls on the skin it doesn't burn...remarkable..."

He fell into deep thought. Vergil emerged from his bath, wrapped himself in a huge square of soft white linen, and (quickly suppressing a shudder) crossed over to a table and seated himself. The top rolled back, the inside rose slowly, lifting a covered tray. Vergil made a start at eating, but his hands began to tremble and he clenched them upon a quaff of strong, sweet black beer, and bent his head to sip from it.

Clemens gazed at him a while, a slight frown passing over his face. "I take it, then, that you met the manticores...and escaped from them."

"No thanks to you." Yes, he had escaped them...the brief and bitter thought came to him, *Perhaps it would have been better if he had not!* He muttered again, "No thanks to you..."

Clemens thrust out his lower lip. "You wanted information about the manticores. I gave you the best information available,

namely, that they are best left alone. Anything else would only embroil you more deeply, more dangerously."

Vergil pondered. The time was passing as if this were any ordinary night succeeding any ordinary day. Yet, what else was there to do? Reveal all to Clemens, entreat his immediate aid? He shrank, with all his nature, from the former; the latter could be, for many reasons, productive of nothing. He recalled his own words to Cornelia: *You do not know the problems involved... it might well take a year...* And, echoing louder and louder in his mind, *I have not the year to spare!*

A year. A year!

"Well, never mind for now," he said. "Someday you will want something from *me*. I will go back down below and get what I know is there. It has to be there. And I must have it, for the Great Science. But I will wait, if I have to." And he did have to! "Meanwhile, Clemens, here's a conundrum for you:

"Who is it that has a villa in the suburbs, speaks our tongue like a Neapolitan, dresses like a foreigner—but with a strip of purple on the border of the robe?"

Again, Clemens snorted. "Is that your idea of a conundrum? Cornelia, of course, the daughter of the old Doge, Amadeo. She married Vindelician of Carsus—

good-looking boy, not a brain in his head—who was making the rounds of the minor courts, playing the exiled claimant and all that.

"Doge Amadeo didn't think much of him, but Cornelia did, so they were married and the old man gave him a villa in the suburbs, plus a few Oscan and Umbrian villages to lord it over. Then the actual king of Carsus died of a hunting accident—'accident,' huh!—and his twin sons soon had a nice little civil war going for the succession; mind if I just taste one of these squabs? You don't seem to care for them."

Vergil left the table to consult his map of the oeconomicum. Clemens continued the story and the squab. The claimants so ravaged the country between them that the Great Council of Carsus met in secret and appealed to the Emperor. Who, suddenly reminded of Vindelician, supplied him with three cohorts, and sent him off to "*restore peace and commerce, suppress brigandage, and allow the smoke from the altars to rise unvexed.*"

The twins met under a truce to discuss joint efforts to put down the invaders; but Cornelia (according to Clemens) sent each of them a confidential message urging him to slay his brother—after which she would betray Vindelician, marry "the rightful king," and, presenting the Em-

peror with an accomplished fact, obtain his support and favor. The scheme worked out perfectly. The twins fell upon one another, inflicted fatal wounds, and their leaderless armies capitulated to Vindelician. Who reigned without opposition, Cornelia doing the actual ruling, for the rest of his life.

Vergil turned from his map. Carsus was a land-locked and mountainous country of no great extent, no great resources, and no great interest to him. It mattered little, after all, where she had learned the evil art practiced by her upon him. That she *had* learned it, used it, was all-sufficient. He did his best to throw off a painful weariness which no sleep could be hoped to assuage while he remained in his present, deprived condition.

"Why," he asked, "is she back at her villa here?"

Clemens, having finished his story and the squabs, belched, wiped his fingers on his tunic. "She's a widow, that's why. And by the law of Carsus, no royal widow, unless she's a queen regnant — which Cornelia, of course, isn't — can remain in the country for fear of her engaging in intrigue. Damned sensible of the Carsians, say I."

Vergil listened without comment grey-green eyes expressionless in his dark, dark-bearded face. His hands wandered, as if

independently, to the case of books set into his great table. The table was circular and revolved, at the touch of a hand, from right to left. At its center, three tiers high, was a cabinet which revolved with equal facility from left to right. Thus the immediate necessities of several current projects, as well as standard needs were at his fingers' ends.

His hands rested on the bottom shelf of the bookcase, and lay inert. "No..." he said, it isn't here. I shall have to go to my library." But he did not move. A numbness so cold and deep that it almost stilled the insistent pain of loss came upon him as he realized how nigh to impossible was the task he was bound to perform. He repeated, mechanically, "I shall have to go to my library..."

Clemens raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Why bother? I am here."

The faintest of faint smiles touched his host's lips. The numbness began to fade. "I suffer your boundless arrogance," Vergil said, "only because it is so often justified. Yes, my Clemens, I see that you are here. The question is, why?"

"As to why I am here. I came thinking that you might know something of antimony; I remained to meditate. I remain, still, because I am food—as well as knowledge — and hence, for now, inert."

Vergil stood up abruptly, dropped the toga-long piece of linen and walked over to his dressing-table. Into a basin of water he poured a very few drops of a preparation of balm, nard, and seed of quince; bathed his hands and face in it. He paused in the act of drying and said, "What was that word? Anti—"

"Antimony. The supposed metal softer than lead." He yawned, picked up a lyre, touched the chords with a tortoise-shell plectrum. "But I am tired of philosophy... Shall I play you something from my *Elegy on the Death of Socrates*? Oh, very well!"

He put down the lyre. "I will say what I know you want me to say; I came also because I was somewhat concerned about you. And now tell me—what does Cornelia want of you?"

Vergil paused, immobile. Then he tucked his long shirt into his tights and adjusted the cod-piece. He fastened his tunic and sat down to pull on the soft, form-fitting calf-length boots. "Not very much, he said. "She wants me to make her a major speculum."

The alchemist pursued his lips and cocked his head. "I see... Nothing simple, such as going to the Mountains of the Moon to gather moonstones, or bringing one or two of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides for her supper. No mere piece of easily-obtained

trivia such as a unicorn's horn, or the Peacock in the Vase of Hermes. Oh. no—

"The Dowager Queen of Carsus only wants a virgin speculum. Why in her entire life Mary of Egypt herself only made one of them. Oh, by Nox and by Numa! Why?"

"She has a daughter on the Great High Road, coming here from Carsus, and is concerned for the girl's safety... The girl is late."

Clemens rolled up his eyes and blew out his lips. "Oh, for some of that essence of wine, distilled five times in my alembic! Only therein, more spirit than fluid, could I find refuge from this woman's incredible... incredible... I lack the word. What next? Will she burn Naples to warm the soles of her feet? Oh, well. A filly, a fool. And I daresay you told her as much. — What did she say when you refused?"

Said Vergil, "I didn't refuse."

Chapter 3

"Ingots... I mean, without even any regard to the question of making the speculum—which is a labor only somewhat less slight than making an aqueduct—there is the question of getting the materials. Very well... ingots of tin, to start with. To start our discussion with, that is. Of course you can't start the work of the speculum with ingots."

Book after book lay open on the long library table where they were seated, one on each side. Clemens held his finger in the codex of the *Manual of Mary of Aegypt*. Vergil gazed into the scroll which contained the fifth book of the learned Syrian, Theopompus Bin-Hadda, *On the Affinities and the Sympathies*. His chin rested in one hand so that his index finger pushed up his lower lip.

No, one could not start the work of the speculum with ingots. Not a major speculum. The entire foundation of the work lay in the principle of creating a *virgin* article; the ordinary, or minor speculum, was merely like a large locket. There were rumors, legends, that somewhere there existed—or had at one time existed—mirrors made, somehow, of glass. But in no work on the subject did anyone claim to have seen a mirror of this sort, let alone direct how to make one. But directions for the artificing of the sort which they now sought, though not copious, were explicit enough.

"We might conjecture a theory," said Vergil, breaking his silence and announcing his descent from the clouds of thought by a slight humming sound; "to this effect: the atoms which comprise the viewing surface of a speculum are not merely passive, reflecting without receiving. To

assume that is to assume that a look is completely intangible, and this we cannot assume, for we have all seen a person obliged to turn around because he has become somehow aware that he is being looked at."

Clemens, judiciously, said, "Granted."

If any surface, Vergil continued, formulating his thoughts to himself for the moment, received an impression which was tangible, some imprint of this impression had to be left upon the surface. "Hence," he said, as if remembering that the alchemist had been waiting, "hence a speculum which has been in use, however briefly, has become as it were clouded, however imperceptibly, with the accumulated impressions it has received. Nor will it suffice simply to fashion a new speculum. It is essential that the very atoms of the metals involved have received as little disturbance as possible. The ordinary craftsman works with scraps of old bronze. A somewhat superior craftsman uses bronze which has not been worked before—as bronze.

"But bronze itself was not a pure metal; it was a fusion of copper and tin. The smith who made bronze made it out of ingots of tin and—usually—ingots of copper; although copper was sometimes available in sheets formed in the shape of an ox-

hide. The smith, therefore, could not forge a virgin bronze because he was not working up virgin tin and virgin copper. Only the pure ores themselves, which had never been shaped by the hand of man, could be used to form the virgin bronze for a virgin speculum. And then —"

"You annoy me with your tedious recapitulation of details known to every apprentice, let alone an adept," Clemens interrupted, testily.

Vergil raised his hand, then smiled — a rather painful and weary smile. "Yes, yes, I know," he said, as his friend continued to fret and mutter, "but on my shelves" — he gestured vaguely behind him — "are books by the music masters of Chandraguptas and Asokas, works I know you would dearly love to see." He paused, significantly. Then: "Help me with this concern, and you will be able to consult them as often and as long as you like. I will *give* them to you."

Clemens drew in his breath. His vast figure seemed to swell. He cast his eyes around the book-crowded room as though looking for the works just mentioned themselves. His face grew red, and he rested his clenched fist upon a curious globe whose surface was covered with a painted map according to the theories of that Aristarchus who taught that the world was round.

THE PHOENIX AND THE MIRROR



"Listen," he said. "You have had these books as long as I have known you. We have long been friends. You knew of my desire for them. What is this Cornelia to you, that now and only now you offer me this gift to gain my help? Did she threaten you? and with what threats? Did she bribe you, cozen you, slip the gold-and-ivory key to her chamber into the palm of your hand? The time and the toil it will take to gratify her whim — *if it can be gratified at all! — why...*"

His voice died away, growled in his chest.

Vergil pushed away the scrolls. "Time and toil... Do you think that *I* do not value my time and toil. Do you imagine that I do not value those books merely because I do not understand them? When it is time for the chick to crack the shell, no heralds are needed to blow trumpets. Time and toil..."

Clemens cleared his throat. He pursed his lips. "You've become quite a philosopher," he said, at last. "Well, well. Very well. You shall have my help and we shall see what chick hatches from this egg. — And now, Master Vergil, allow me to point out to you that there are two requirements which must be fulfilled before anything at all can be done towards making a major speculum —

"And both requirements are im-

possible of fulfilment!"

He lifted one wing of his moustache with his stylus and leered on that one side. Then, replacing the stylus in the writing case fastened to his belt, he held up two huge and hairy fingers. "You cannot get ore of tin —" He pressed down one finger. "You cannot get ore of copper." He pressed down the other.

Clemens had hit upon the crux of the entire problem, as Vergil well knew. Copper came from Cyprus — the Island of Aphrodite was, in fact, so rich in the metal that it had given its name to it — but the route to and from Cyprus was in effect cut off by the ever-swarming ships of the fierce Sea-Huns, and had been for years. The Sea-Huns allowed, by agreement and for tribute (euphemistically termed *guard-money*), one great fleet a year in each direction — from the Empire to Cyprus, from Cyprus to the Empire. There were, to be sure, blockade-runners of a sort: small, swift vessels plying between the eastern shore of the Island and the nearer coast of Little Asia. But these risked only cargo light in weight and precious in every ounce — gold, perfume, pretty girls.

Even so, because of the great convoys that came in once a year, there were warehouses in Naples piled from tile roofs to stone foundations with copper,

but it was copper smelted into ingots for the most part; it was not copper ore.

Yes, Vergil could get copper, but it would be copper changed by the hand of man. It wouldn't be the *virgin* copper he needed.

He idly pushed aside a stylus near at hand. "You're right, of course, but for the moment let's put aside the problem of the copper." Then leaning over the long table, "Our *first* problem is the tin."

Tin came, of course, from Tinland, a mysterious island realm, in this respect if in no other like Cyprus. But whereas Cyprus had once been and still was officially part of the Oeconomium, Tinland had never been. It was located somewhere to the west and north in the Great Dark Sea, beyond Tartis. If nothing more was known about Tinland (though legends thereof were not lacking), then even less was known about Tartis. No man of the Empire had ever seen it—at least, none had ever left any account. A rumor persisted that Tartis itself had long ago been conquered and destroyed. It might have been—but throughout the Empire there were small colonies of Tartismen, living under a sort of autonomy by ancient treaty-right. Each ward, as their colonies were called, was ruled by its own captain-lord. They were reported to own immense wealth. But they

continued to trade.

With a slight sigh Vergil shook his head at the apparent insolubility of the problem—in both cases, the copper and the tin. He reached over and pulled the casque down over the glove on the table. Then he got up and stretched, his shadow gesturing grotesquely on the table.

"I know it looks hopeless," he said, starting for the door, "but the tin should be our first concern—because access to the suppliers is near at hand. However, you leave the obtaining of the virgin ores to me. Only help me in this matter, when I return, and—remember—the works of the music masters of Chandraguptas and Asokas are yours."

Chapter 4

Tartis-ward in Naples consisted chiefly of Tartis Port, a rather small harbor, and Tartis Castle, a huge cyclopean mass of stone. It was not in the least like any other castle in the whole dogedom. Passing from the Great Harbor into Tartis-port, Vergil was struck immediately by the difference in tempo. Everything was slower, everything was quieter. Everything was...yes...poorer.

There were no guards posted at the foot of the Castle steps, nor when Vergil reached the top step after a wearying climb, was there any guard there either; indeed,

he had not at first realized that he was at the top, so gradually did the steps become shallower, so irregular did the footing yet remain. He did not at first notice the man in the scarlet cloak, either.

It was the legs he noticed first.

They stood upon a block of stone set by itself in the middle of the courtyard, by their look strong and healthy legs; and yet they trembled. Planted firmly on the stone, feet unmoving, tremors of nerve and muscle ran through them without ceasing. Vergil raised his eyes.

The man was dressed in the embroidered and pleated linen garment which was the traditional habit of the Tartismen, and over it he wore a short cloak, dyed in scarlet. All this Vergil saw in a second, and in another second he had said, "Sir, I seek the Captain-lord;" but before he had finished saying it his voice had almost faltered, having the latter second seen the man's face.

This man is blind, this man is deaf, he is looking out to sea for a ship which will never come—so ran his rapid, startled, and successive thoughts—then, so: He has taken a vow to stand here, thus, for a certain length of time, and will stand here thus though the Heavens may fall... and the man turned his gaze on Vergil... This man is mad. He would kill me if he could.

In a low voice, Vergil said, "Sir, my pardon for disturbing you." And he passed on. Rounding a corner, he came upon the two other men — both wearing Tartis clothes, but neither in a scarlet cloak — emerging from a door into the interior of the castle; and to them he repeated that he was looking for the Captain-lord.

Both showed surprise, as much at his presence as at his request. One of them nodded, the other looked over his shoulder as they continued on their way, and he followed them into what appeared to be an office or an ante-chamber. The Tartismen gestured to Vergil to sit — and vanished through a narrow door which closed behind them. Vergil sat.

This part of the Castle was the first he had seen with furnishings, though they were scanty and curious. There was a saddle-rug or blanket of Parthian weave spread on a wooden trestle with carved ends, a desk on which lay a codex in an extreme state of disrepair, a silver dish with a stale piece of bread and a fish-bone, and a leather screen. Feeling the muscles in his legs begin to ache from the climb, Vergil sighed. From behind the screen something stirred.

"Forgive me, I was not aware anyone had remained here," a voice said, and the screen was pushed aside. The light from the

embrasure fell full into Vergil's eyes, and he squinted, shielding them with his hand.

"I am waiting to see the Captain-lord."

"Ah... Please, then, come and wait here. It is more comfortable."

There was a long bench by the window-niche. His eyes adjusting now, Vergil examined his "host." The voice hinted of Punic or Sytlian origins, the clothes were of good Neapolitan make. His manner, though tense, was controlled. He might have been of any age. His complexion —

"My name is Captain Ebbed-Saphir, but they call me the Red Man. It's easy to see why. I'm a Phoenician. Our skins seem to take the sun, to retain it, but we do not tan. 'Phoenician,' of course, means just that — the Red People. But you know all this, of course...

Vergil did indeed know all of this and had been letting his thoughts wander, idly noticing a ring on the Red Man's hand — with the device of a phoenix sejant on a pyre — but he began to pay closer attention when the Phoenician started to explain his presence there.

"Yes, I visit the Tartismen whenever I am in a port that has a Tartis ward. I have carried cargo for them upon occasions, and have always found them honest — though not always easy. Be-

sides, I feel a certain affinity with them. I, too, am of a race of exiles."

By this time the Phoenician had taken his place at full length upon the bench, and with a weary wave of his hand, ended: "Even so, as for the Captain-lord, I have never seen him, myself..."

Then, giving over the effort of speech entirely, he invited Vergil, with gestures, to admire the view. He did not look up or speak when a Tartisman with a woolly beard came bustling in and motioned Vergil with both arms and an expression of great importance to come along.

Vergil tarried a moment. In a low voice he said quickly to the Red Man, Ebbed-Saphir, "Who is the one in the scarlet cloak?"

A flicker of something disturbed the raptness of the Phoenician's gaze. "Do not ask, do not interfere," he said. And his look returned to the prospect of the suburban villas stretching along the Bay for miles.

"Well?" cried Woolly Beard. "Well? Captain-lord? Why?"

And then he screamed — a scream of utterly unbelieving agony.

Scarlet ran before Vergil's eyes. Woolly Beard lay doubling on the floor. The Phoenician was not to be seen. The man who had been standing outside on the block of stone went rushing through the inner door, his cloak streaming

and whipping. His voice cried terrible, inarticulate things. His short sword ran blood. And Vergil ran behind him.

The course he ran was a nightmare that led down endless Cyclopean corridors, echoing with the frenzied cries of the man ahead of him — a man who, every now and then, would turn and lunge at him. The face was no longer more than faintly human. Once, dodging back, Vergil fell and hit his head a sickening crack against the stones. The man in the scarlet cloak turned round and ran again. The cloak caught upon the protruding socket of a burnt-out torch, ripped, hung there. Vergil snatched it as he ran past, holding it in one hand as he groped desperately with the other, got hold of the writing-case in his belt.

Suddenly they were in a suite of furnished chambers. A door burst open and a man stood there, frozen before he could show either astonishment or terror. The madman howled, leaped forward. Vergil leaped after him, bent, whipped forward the cloak with the writing-case knotted into one end of it; stopped short, jerked back.

Tripped, felled by his own cloak, the attacker lay before him on the floor, motionless for an instant which Vergil dared not let pass unused. He jumped, coming down with his knees and all his weight just upon the place below

the ribs, turning his toes so he could move back on the balls of his feet, and pinioned the madman by the elbows.

Now men poured forth, it seemed, from everywhere. They beat the murderer to the floor again, and one of them raised the sword.

"Good is the strong wine," the Captain-lord said, in his guttural voice; "and I have had put in it a medicine or two. But it is to be drunk, not held in the cup."

Vergil drank. The wine was of a vintage strange to him, and tasted of herbs. It was somewhat bitter and despite himself he shuddered. Then, as if with the shudder, all the weakness left him. "Why did he want to do it?" he asked.

The Captain-lord took in a hiss of breath, held it, shrugged. "To explain it, fully, would take long — and then there would be explanations of the explanations. I will speak shortly. There was a matter of a woman, a punishment, a consent I would not give." Seated, he looked immense. Huge head, huge chest, broad shoulders. His legs were short, though, and he limped. His hair was white; his face, seamed.

"Once there were guards all around," he continued, "to protect from a danger. I, thinking there was none, removed them. And so — look — danger: and from within. Tell me, now, with truth,

who you are and why you came."

The room was elaborately, richly furnished, but everything seemed a little old, a little shabby, a little dirty, too.

"Speculum majorum, I have never heard of one. Magic. I have no concern in it. Queens, Carsus, copper—all strange things to me." The Captain-lord shook his massy head. He raised his eyebrows, his great chest filled with air. "But—*tin*? Tin! Yes! With this I have a concern. The Captain-lord does not sell tin, but he can give all you want. So—Vergil. Doctor. Magus. How much tin is enough?"

Slowly, carefully, as simply as he could, Vergil explained that he required only as much tin as would fit into the palms of his hands...but that it must be virgin tin.

"I understand," the old man said. "You explain to me most carefully. What you want now, it is not simple. Goods come down to us slowly, from the north, from the west, from ward to ward. Virgin tin, it comes not here. It is cast into ingots so far away that I, even the Captain-lord, I do not know where. I can try to obtain. But I am only Captain-lord here. In another ward I am only another name. Far enough away to find virgin tin, I am not even only a name.

"Here I have power of life, power of death. Elsewhere, I have no power. My influence is strong

at Rome, weak at Marsala. Ice—do you know ice, Doctor? Pass one piece from hand to hand. It melts. It melts away..."

More than ice and personal influence melts away, Vergil thought. The whole Tartis system seemed to be melting away, seemed to be in decay, a shadow of its past.

But so long as even a shadow of it remained, he had to make use of it.

"I will try," said the Captain-lord. "Why not? It is gratitude. Perhaps in three years time—virgin tin."

Someone came and lit the lamps. No longer dim, the room seemed no longer shabby, old, worn. In the dancing shadow the old Captain-lord grew younger. A spark of light glittered on the boss of a round shield hanging on the wall by an auroch's horn.

"Sir," said Vergil, "Three years time will not do. Three months may even be too long, too late."

A faint, wry smile touched the old man's lips. "Doctors of Magic and Science, even you are bound by time? And what, then, of me? Never mind. Bring here the horn."

The lowing note sounded deeply. After a while a servant came. Torches were obtained, and by their hissing flames they were lighted down the same vast, turning, Cyclopean steps; and into a courtyard filled with a strong,

rank, sharp odor. A man with leather wristlets looked up from placing bits of meats in a bowl of water. He was obviously a falconer, thought Vergil. But where did the Tartismen hawk? And who had ever heard of their hawking? Furthermore, not all of the equipment to be seen was the familiar "hawks' furniture" of falconry.

The two old men spoke together in their own language, then turned to enter a wooden out-building built against the Castle's wall, the Captain-lord beckoning his guest to follow. The place smelt like a mews and there were subdued birdnoises from the cages.

"This is the Master of the Air," said the Captain-lord. Vergil bowed. The Master grunted, looking far from honored, far from pleased; and when his commandant went on to say, "He will arrange the sending," the Master of the Air protested bitterly — so his tone and manner showed, though Vergil could understand no word. Still muttering, he reached into a cage and took out a bird the like of which Vergil had never seen before. It was gold in color and had a crest upon its head, and it bent forward and nibbled gently on the Master's index finger with what seemed like affection. The man's gaunt face softened, and he spoke to Vergil for the first time.

"She was sent me in egg," he said; "one of a clutch of two, under a broody hen. The other hatched not. I raised, I taught. For only great danger was she to be sent —"

"The danger came today," the Captain-lord interrupted. "And he, this Vergil Magus, saved from danger. He has earned the sending, I say, enough."

The Master of the Air seemed about to weep. Touched, Vergil would have liked to decline whatever it was — he was still not sure — that the order touched on. But he remembered his own need, and his own pain.

With a final mutter, the Master of the Air tucked the golden bird under one arm and went off into the shadowy corners of the mews. He came back with a small falcon-eagle on each wristlet, glaring fiercely from their yellow eyes. The Captain-lord took the bird of gold in his hands, gently, and the bird of gold looked up at him. He spoke to it, and it seemed to follow. He spoke again — stopped — spoke again. The same words seemed to occur each time. It was as if he were instructing the bird.

"Am I to understand," the thought occurring suddenly to him, "that this bird of gold will carry a message? You will teach it to speak the words—like a popinjay? And will it learn them quickly?"

"No. It cannot speak."

"Then —"

"It will carry your message as my message. And where it puts down, there it will write the words."

Write!

And the Captain-lord did not believe in magic!

"Enough, then. It has learned. The two others go with it for guardians. Master of the Air, let it be done."

The master of the Air carressed the birds, all three, lovingly, gently. He whispered in their ears, he kissed the fierce heads of the falcon-eagles. Then he loosed their leathern jesses. They fluttered their wings. The bird of gold was tossed up. The torchlight glittered on her golden pinions. She circled once. Twice. A third time. The falconets shot up like crossbow bolts. The three vanished into the night. One soft grey feather came floating down and landed at Vergil's foot. From far, very far and above, a faint scream sounded on the night wind, and the torches smoked and flared.

Declining with thanks the offer of a torchman to light him home, Vergil took his leave of Tartis Castle. Scarcely noting the strong, familiar smells of the Main Port, he let his mind run freely... What a journey lay before the bird of gold and its pair of protectors! Seas and storms, crags

and forests — how far? No one knew.

But what an even more difficult — perhaps impossible — journey lay before him. Cyprus! Even if he could ever hope to clear away the obstacles, even if he could find some private shipmaster who might agree to such a perilous voyage — But what about the Red Man, Ebbed-Saphir? Yes, he would have to sound out the Phoenician in the morning. Still, even if he agreed, the chances of getting past the Sea-Huns...

Maybe Clemens was right after all. Vergil remembered the finality with which the alchemist had assured him: 'You cannot get ore of copper.' — But he also had not forgotten the Queen Dowager's parting words: 'No, no, my mage. I do not think you will dally.' — Nor would she!

By now, he began to notice his surroundings; he had left the warehouse district of the port, and was unconsciously taking a shorter way to his own quarter of the city. He would have to hurry — there were so many things to get ready...

In the morning then — he quickened his step — and for many mornings thereafter — to Cyprus! Else he would never again be what once he was on the day he eluded the manticores but not the Lady Cornelia.

End of Part One

Part Two

Chapter I

Too long a time later — almost it seemed like years — Vergil stood on the narrow deck of the Red Man's boat, its bird prow thrust out — a figurehead carved in the shape of some grotesque and heavily stylized bird — dipping its nose into the sea off Naples. He would have much to tell Clemens about the long voyage to Cyprus and back — especially about the precious cargo of pure copper ore, stowed safely below decks, given to him by the grateful King of Paphos, whom Vergil had saved from being turned into a wolf — and about Bayla King, weakest yet ultimately the strongest of the three Sea-Hun kings, who helped them win safe passage to the island sacred to Aphrodite. But if Vergil knew his friend, the alchemist would be more interested in examining the ore than in listening to a detailed account of his adventures on Cyprus.

But now, the Phoenician silent — as ever — beside him, Vergil gave himself up to the pleasure of once again seeing the well-remembered beauty of the Bay, Vesuvio's white plume and Capri's purple rock, ancient and teeming Neapolis climbing her steepy hills above the harbors thick with shipping.

The Red Man remained silent. All during the voyage home, Vergil had noticed an increasing tenseness in the Phoenician, and had often wondered what the man's worry might be, but his companion never spoke of it.

A breeze touched their faces. "I smell the wild herbs of the countryside," Vergil said, his melancholy tinged with a shadow of pleasure.

The Red Man sniffed. "And I smell the rotting garbage and the man-stale in the streets," he said.

"This, too, is life," said Vergil, after a slight pause.

The reaction astonished him. Ebbled-Saphir's face twisted and suddenly he seemed a thousand years old. "Oh, Melcarth!" he groaned. "Oh, Tyrian Hercules! Life! Life!" He gazed inland, mouth open on silent pain, as if seeking an answer. But none came; nothing and no one came — save only the harbor master's clerk, seeking the manifest of the vessel, a possible bribe, a probable free meal, and at least a glass of wine.

Later, as he and Vergil parted, all that Captain Ebbled-Saphir said was, "We shall see each other again."

When he was in his own familiar street again, at his own house, "Watcher, what news?" he asked the guardian Head.

Its eyes and mouth opened, moved, focused, spoke, saying, "Master, news from Tartis."

This was confirmed soon enough by Clemens himself, whom Vergil had left in charge of all preparations. The alchemist was seated in his favored corner of Vergil's favored room, his leg crossed at an angle which put his left foot almost under his right ear, and he hummed and tutted to himself contentedly as he read from a small book. Looking up brightly at his friend's entrance, he sang out, "What say you, Vergil, shall we attempt to employ ash of basilisk in this process? Ah...before you answer and before I forget: it's come. What was sent to Tinland for. Now — ash of basilisk —"

But Vergil was not yet ready to discuss ash of basilisk. He sank into his chair with ineffable relief. "The bird of gold, the messenger bird, it's returned?" Clemens slowly revolved his massy, maned head. Vergil felt a touch of cold on his heart. After having obtained copper by going himself to Cyprus, would he have to attempt the more than fabulous journey to Tinland? "But you said —"

"I said, not 'What was sent to Tinland,' but, 'What was sent to Tinland *for*.' That is, the tin itself. No, sadly, that curious and so useful creature never returned, and only one of the guardian



falcon-eagles . . . sadly battered, sadly torn, but bearing a purse of ore. The Tartisman called the Master of the Air was sadly bitter, I'm afraid. Now, concerning ash of basilisk — ”

“No,” Vergil said, “I think not. The whole thing is far too chancy and uncertain. There is so much which *must* be done. Concerning which my Clemens — ”

The alchemist, who had been nodding assent, lips pursed, now lowered his leg and sat up straight rubbing his hands. “I think you will be well pleased with the preparations. We have, first, enclosed the larger portion of the yard and thus created a new workroom, untainted by the residues of any previous works. I have had windows installed of thin panes of alabaster which will admit a light both clear and yet not harsh. Lamps have been hung and new ones, too, also chimneys of the same alabaster. The furnace is prepared, the hearth, the wood and charcoal, the kiln, the tools and implements, anvil and forge; sand and clay and wax, benches and wheels and iron. We have gotten ready, also, vessels of the finest earth, almost like glass, but less fragile. There are liquors of lye and potash, and pickles of aquafortis or oil of vitriol, as you may prefer; even sawdust of boxwood.”

Softly, Vergil said, “Good . . . Good . . . ”

Stroking his huge beard with his huge hand, Clemens said, cheerfully, “I shall think the less of you if you do not check every item as carefully as if I had never seen to it, and you may think the less of me if you find anything not just as you would have it.”

Vergil nodded. His pain had now reached a level at which it almost acted as its own anesthetic. Even more softly, he asked, “Any other news?”

Clemens reflected. No. No other news. Cornelia had been poking about once or twice, looking ready to order all hands flayed and flogged at the slightest excuse. But the fact that preparations were always and obviously going on helped allay her wrath . . .

“Oh.” He suddenly looked blank. Vergil raised his eyebrows in inquiry. “You’re back. By Poseidon’s cod-pie! How silly of me to have forgotten that you’d gone somewhere farther away than, say, a trip to Elba or Ischia.

“Forgive my babbling on, and begin to tell me of everything which happened.”

Later, in the workroom — his assistants and Clemens around him — Vergil raised his white wand. Everyone ceased to draw breath, the hollow ball in the basin of the clepsydra touched bottom with a clear, faint chime; he whipped the wand downward in signal; a dull, heavy, thudding

blow followed immediately, no less startling for having been quite expected. The work of crushing the copper ore in the mill had begun.

The green copper-stone was hard, but gradually it yielded to the importunities of the huge, pounding pestle, like a vertical battering-ram. This first treatment was intended only to reduce the pieces of its mass in size.

After a time, Vergil raised his wand and the mill fell silent. The green ore was removed and piled in a heap and burned like lime. It did not lose color, but it lost much of its hardness; after which it was cooled, returned to the mill, and broken up small. It was then ready for the furnace.

Red-hot coals were now placed in the furnace and small pieces of ore spread out on top, then more coals, then the ore again, and so on until the furnace was filled. All was swift, sure, silent; no foot slipped upon the carefully sanded floor. Some time passed, and Vergil drew Clemens's attention to a vessel placed some way below and apart, whereunto a flow of metal was directed by channels graved for the purpose. An iridescent sheen was on its thick and scummy surface.

"Now the lead begins to separate," he said.

"Some will still remain, unless —"

"Some *should* remain, to serve

to hold the tin and copper together well, and to help give the bronze a good polish."

The bellows were not now needed, for the wind, entering into the opening below, drew the flames well. Clemens said, "This should now remain heating a very long time, and although we have a proverb, *The eye of the Master melts the metal*, still, the Master's eye is not needed at the moment. Come and sit down and let us talk for a while."

Thus, with due precautions both mechanical and astrological, with attentions alchemical and metallurgical, the work slowly proceeded.

The speculum proper consisted of two parts: the actual reflecting surface, and the cover, fastened to it with screws and studs and clasps and catches; the entire product rather resembling a large locket. Some of these smaller pieces would be wrought by hand, some cast in molds like the larger pieces. In preparation for making the molds, they now began the refining of the wax. Tallow, coarse and stinking, would not do; nothing but pure wax of bees would do. On one point authorities were unanimous: the wax must be gathered from the combs of bees who had fed on Mount Caucasus — and nowhere else.

The wax was melted slowly over a fire of fennel and strained; washed with water, and again

strained; purified and strained; refined and strained; ever with a cloth of an increasing fineness. Vergil himself had neither thought nor patience for this — and the process repeated over and over and over. Slowly. Slowly. Slowly.

And the other tasks proceeded. Slowly, slowly, slowly.

Finally the wax was pure enough, fine enough.

They purified the copper further with three ranges of bellows working at the forge by night and day, night after night and day after day, and poured it finally into ingot-molds. Before it was cooled and while it was still red hot, they held it with tongs upon the anvil and struck it with the largest hammer. It cracked. They melted it once again, repeating the long process, drew it forth again, struck it again. This time it did not crack.

Vergil bared his arm, Clemens bound it. Clemens bared his arm. Vergil bound it. Then all of Vergil's assistant — Iohan, Tynus, Perrin — did the same. The veins swelled. The lancet passed between the mage and his friend. The blood spurted forth, was caught in the vessel. Each gave, none withheld. And then the vessel was full, and then they plunged the glowing ingots into it, and thus they cooled them and completed the work of the smelting.

Models for the double disks had been carved of ordinary wax, studied, corrected, approved; then copied in the wax of Caucasus for the final model, copied so carefully and with such exquisite, agonizing care as to make painstaking seem slovenly: stroke by stroke and flake by flake and quarter inch by quarter inch. The wax must not be too warm, the wax must not be too cold; it must not melt, it must not sag nor slip, it must not grow brittle and chip. And every one of these steps was taken in accordance with, never in defiance of, the celestial confluences. Finally, omens having been taken on the thunder-chart, the entire modelings, save for the tops of the sprues, were coated with the specially-prepared clay; allowed to dry...and dry...and dry...coated again...dried...coated a third time. When the hour auspicious and appropriate arrived, a fire was built, aspersed and censed with appropriate herbs, and the molds placed adjacent to it, over vessels of water to collect the precious wax which, after it had melted and left its impression on the clay, was poured out through the sprue-channels. Then, when a Sun Hour, suitable for workings with fire, coincided with a time acceptable to the chthonic Presences having jurisdiction over earth and things made with earth, arrived;

Vergil and Clemens and adepts and workmen (all clad in garments of the darkest red to avoid disharmonies) chanting the strange, discordant Etruscan Litany, reversed the molds and now placed them carefully in the fire with the sprue-holes pointing downwards. And in that position they remained until the clay was turned as red as Mars ruling molten things, as red as the fire itself...as red as the red robes of the sun...as red as the earth.

On a Thursday, fortunate period of benefic Jupiter ruling prophecy and things at long distance and beyond the veil, the Street of the Horse-Jewellers was laid end to end ankle-deep in tan-bark to muffle sounds and concussions. The molds had been heating with a low fire kept in, and this was now increased, and the crucibles got ready. The bellows were fixed, with two strong men to each one. All now had to go with speed and precision. Fresh coals were arranged in the furnace for the molds and the molds set on them, supported roundabout with hard stones such as could not break with the heat of the fire, *lapidem super lapidem*, stone upon stone and with sufficient interstices until they were half a foot higher than the molds and burning coals around them and fresh coals over them to the top. They burned, they sank, were replenished, and again, till three-times.

Vergil lifted the cover to peer inside, but the heat drove him back. Clemens, more used to it, peered quickly within, and the heat crisped and singed his beard. "It is red *hót*," he said. Vergil hastened with deliberate steps to the crucible where the copper was waiting, and had it put inside and mixed with coals. At his gesture, the bellows began to work again. A green flame arose from the crucible. The copper had begun to melt. Immediately Vergil signaled for more coals to be added, ran to the mold furnace and oversaw the work of removing the stones and the fire and replacing it with earth. He ran back to the fire, stirred the copper with a long charred stick.

"Now!" he said.

The tin was added, and carefully stirred and stirred until it too was all molten and all mixed, and meanwhile the crucible was with infinite care turned around from side to side in order to maintain an even temperature. Then it was removed from its own fire and carried to the molds, skimmed of coal and ash, and a straining cloth placed over the opening in the mold of the first half. Vergil threw himself down as near to the mold as he could.

"Pour!" he said.

They poured, slowly, slowly, and he listened. He gestured them to pause. He listened. All was well, nothing murmured, nothing

grumbled, nothing groaned. He gestured, he listened, and they poured. At length one of his assistants said, "Master, it is done." Vergil said nothing. They waited and they watched. It was quite some while before they realized that he was not still listening, and then, but silently and gently for the sake of the molten mass within, they lifted him from where he lay, insensible, and so they carried him—some of them—to his upper chambers.

But Clemens remained below and directed the casting of the second half.

Presently, when Vergil had recovered from his exhaustion of body and spirit, they broke open the well-cooled molds and removed the two parts of the speculum. He then had them boiled in a strong liquor of potash until all residual dirt, visible or otherwise, was removed, and rinsed in hot water and dried. The disks were then annealed in fire until red-hot, the utmost care being taken that they were not made white-hot. Should any dirt or impurities have still remained, they were now gone, and the metal made softer and fit for the burnisher—but it was not yet his time. The bronzes were cooled and then placed in a pickle of one part of oil of vitriol and three parts of water.

The pieces remained a while in

the solution, then were removed and rinsed in clean, cold water, thoroughly scoured with clean, wet sand, and then placed in a wooden pail of water. Thence they were removed for further dippings in strong solution and rinsings in water. After the last dip and rinse in cold water, the bronzes were next washed finally with boiling water and then dried with sawdust of sawed boxwood, and then—care being taken that it at no time be touched with naked fingers, they were covered and wrapped in the softest of chamois leathers.

And now came the time of the burnishers, Isacco and Lionelo, both of them blind. When the Moon began to pass through Scorpio and Pisces, the discs and all of their smaller fittings, carefully wrapped and boxed, were handed over to them, and they entered a specially prepared workroom. The door was closed upon them... and upon the light. There, within, the opaque surface of the mirror would gradually become fit for reflecting. But it would reflect nothing, and, even if by rare happenstance it did, no one there could see it. And there in the blackness—the lid was fitted on and all the clasps and fastenings put in place. And so wrapped again, and boxed again, and returned to the world outside again.

Vergil placed around the box

a series of knotted scarlet silken cords. "Pull," he invited Clemens. "Try your strength."

The alchemist shook his head. "I thank you, no. I am an alchemist and not a magician... Well! I have a multitude of things to attend to at home, but of course I will be on hand at the viewing, though Father Vesuvio himself intervene to prevent me. *Absit omen.*"

Chapter 2

There was a belvedere set into the upper part of one of the upper rooms in the House of the Brazen Head, with twelve windows, through each of which, during its proper month, the sun at high meridian cast a beam of light; and the tessellated pavement below was further marked off with annotated areas, some of them overlapping, for day and by day; so that the chamber formed one great sundial. Vergil had been at work with his astrolabe. His face was yellow and sunken and he did not even look up as Cornelia entered; then, suddenly, he did. It was their first meeting since his return, and one might have admired the restraint she showed in not vexing him with the frequent visitations she must dearly have desired to make. Their eyes met now. It was she who, almost instantly, withdrew and broke the gaze. Silently she

approached the box and looked at it, extended her hand, hastily and almost fearfully drew it back. She was very pale, and the skin about her eyes was dark violet. She sighed, compressed her lips, clasped her hands. Vergil took hold of the clew and gave the red silk cord the slightest of tugs, murmuring a few words as he did so. All the elaborate cordings and knottings fell open and slack, the sides of the box parted slowly and settled back onto the table.

And the speculum was revealed.

Like a great locket, it rested there, shining and brightening. As if at an agreed signal, all began to walk around it. Its back was ornately and beautifully designed and inscribed, but no one lingered to examine or to decipher; all walked with eyes awestruck and unfocused. And, as they did so, an horologe began to sound the twelfth hour, and as it did the room began to darken until at *eleven* it was almost black. Then came the stroke of twelve, Vergil reached out and snapped back the lid and the bronze, resounding like a bell, encompassed and occluded the stroke of noon. Simultaneously the darkness was pierced by a broad shaft of sunlight and Cornelia pulled from the bosom of her robe a long golden pin and thrust it at the blank but luminous face of the mirror's disk. The pin touched, the surface of the disk went in-

to flux like oil resting upon the surface of water when disturbed. The disorder became a whirlpool, round and round, drawing everything towards it and everything into it.

"Laura!"

And there she was, pacing slowly on great cyclopean steps; near her, always near her, but never quite in clear range of vision, was something ugly and dreadful. Whose voice had cried her name, Vergil did not know, but it was Cornelia's voice which cried out now, cried no name, cried out. The whirlpool swirled reversewise, closed in, the scene vanished, and the last vanishing echoes of the stroke of twelve were heard. The mirror was a mirror now, and nothing more. Vergil, Clemens, Cornelia, saw their own faces, but Vergil now *saw* what he had already *felt*: it was his own face, his true face, his face complete. His missing soul had returned to him. Cornelia — she who now stood staring, staring, staring — had kept her word.

To her it had been plain magic. To Clemens, a living metal had revealed a living truth. To Vergil, a focus had been provided to reveal in presently visible terms an event occurring elsewhere and at that moment impressed upon the universal aether, from which the virgin speculum (virgin now no longer) had received it and

revealed it upon its virgin surface.

Cornelia spoke. She did not speak, she was pointing at the wall, her face worked, her lips moved, her throat moved, a harsh and fearful cry came from her mouth. There on the wall in a luminous circle was the design of the four figures of the four quadrants of the uranoscope; around the rim, both clockwise and counter-clockwise, the inscription in the curious and impressive letters of the Umbrian alphabet, so often written mirror-fashion, widdershins.

Vergil seized her hand. "Madame, do not be afraid," he said, urgently. "This is the so-called magic mirror effect, yet it is no true magic but an effect derived from purely natural causes. Come and see come and see — " He showed her the design, now reflected on the wall, on the back of the surface of the speculum, whence (he explained) by a seemingly inexplicable effect caused by molecular disturbances, it was cast upon another surface and thus gave the impression that the solid bronze was transparent as glass. "I do not wonder at your surprise," he said. "No doubt you failed to observe, while looking at the reverse of the disk before, that it showed the heavenly configurations...the Sombre Warrior in the North, and in the South, the Vermillion Phoenix — "

She tore her hand loose from

his grasp. Fear now partially retreated and was replaced by rage, but did not vanish utterly; and hatred struggled with them both. She turned upon her heel and left the room.

Softly, Clemens said, "It is done."

But Vergil knew that it was not done, that only a phase of it was done. The girl in the mirror, the first woman he had really "seen" in months, he had fallen in love with her.

And now he had to find her.

Clemens slapped his thigh in wrath and bawled from his chair that Vergil was acting like a concupiscent schoolboy. "I understand it clearly enough. You've seen nothing fairer than a furnace nor comelier than a crucible all this time. You were taut, wrought up, tense . . . dispense me the need to display the other many adjectives. And then in that, admittedly magnificent, abrupt moment you saw what I concede without argument was the face of rather an attractive wench, and — Zeus! You weren't *thinking*, man — you were simply reacting. It wasn't your heart, it was your cod-piece that the impulse came from!

"No, no," he said, now in a softer voice; "really. You had that damnable trip to Cyprus, followed by that damnable work of the speculum. True, you are

now looking better, but you do not look well yet. It is madness to embark on another journey." His arguments were long, vigorous, logical. They did not avail.

"She is in Lybya," Vergil insisted. "That is where she is. When I drew up the horary chart, it clearly revealed Lybya —"

Clemens closed the gigantic leatherbound codex with a clap. "Clearly revealed Lybya!" he mocked. "Aside from AEgypt, Mauretania, and AEthiopea, most of Africa *is* Lybya. And you intend to search this infinity of desert just because of what might be no more than a random configuration?"

Vergil straightened up and stretched on his toes. He was wearing one of his cloaks of sunset blue edged in gold brodered work.

"Permit me," he said, quietly, "to know at my age the difference between casual attraction and that deeper feeling which is both so rare and so valuable. I must go —"

"To Lybya. Chasing the stars. — What other auspicious omens impel you?"

Vergil walked off into the darkness of his library's farther end. "Come and see," his voice invited. As Clemens, muttering and grunting, advanced with caution, a square of light opened in the obscurity — a map on oiled parchment with lamplight thrown upon it from behind. Vergil had again

his white wand in his hand and now used it as it were a teacher's pointer. They had, in the newly-opened surface of the major speculum, seen Laura pacing down a vasty flight of steps of unmistakable provenance. No hand of man or men had ever cut those great stony slabs and wrested them into place. The craftsmanship thereof was as unmistakable as the leopards' claws or the fleecy hair of the wise AEthiopeans.

"They were the work of the four-armed Cyclopes," Clemens said. "Granted. What then?"

"What then, did the Cyclopes erect so many castelations as to baffle us forever? It isn't so. A record has, after all, come down to us. All of those they set up in central Sicily, their first home, have been torn down with immense labor by the Tyrants of that island, to prevent their providing strongholds for rebels." The wand touched the map, now here, now there; the points touched glowed briefly. "The castle of Mycenae, I've been lately informed, is a heap of rubble; the one occupied by the Tartismen here in Naples, we have searched, and found—as I would have expected — nothing. That in Carthage, as it later became, was with the rest of that great city destroyed by great Scipio and its very site sown with salt." One by one the locations of each Cyclopean fortress became a tiny

spot of blue-white light, like a wandering star, then vanished.

What was left? There was one other castle that the hideous Cyclopes made, each glaring with his single huge eye, toiling and straining each with his four arms. "It is not marked for sure upon my map. All that I know of it is that it lies somewhere in Thither Lybya. And it is there, Clemens, that I must go. Captain Ebbled-Saphir will be my guide again, for he knows where it is."

Clemens sighed, sagged into a chair, wagged his huge mane. At length he said that he would not argue. "At any rate, I suppose you may rely upon the Red Man as you did before," he conceded. Vergil was silent here. The Red Man had made it quite clear that, for reasons of his own, and which he would not discuss — let alone disclose — he would guide Vergil to within sight of the cyclopean castle...but no further.

Whatever it was which they had seen, without being able to see it in any way clearly at the edge of the mirror; whatever was with Laura, ugly and dreadful, Vergil would have to confront it alone.

Part Three

Chapter I

The desert of Lybya stretched on all around them, dry and glar-

ing, red and orange and yellow and white. The sands undulated like billows. Already the coast lay far behind them.

It could not be said that Vergil and the Red Man followed a road. It was barely even a trail... a faintly glistening streak was all it was, like a mark upon the flesh of a woman who has begun to put on weight.

Vergil rode as long as he could stand it, then he walked until the sand became too hot to bear, then he donned the blue burnoose again and remounted. Now and then a rock stood out above the sands like a twisted chimney, polished by ages of sand until it glistened.

Beyond the fifth oasis—after endless days, then nights of exhausting travel from one oasis to the next—Vergil was not surprised to find the remains—torn rags and gnawed bones cracked for marrow—of several men along the way. But for the Phoenician, he shuddered slightly, both of them might have come to the same fate, for his guide had warned him about the deadly petromorphs, stone things which came alive at night and loved to crunch the glowing coals of fires or anything else they encountered that gave out warmth. And it was the Red Man too who—back by the fourth oasis—had revealed an unsuspected power to

create, with his pointing finger alone, a ring of fire that drove off the tiny, hideous and vicious Troglodytes that had suddenly leaped up around them—out of the sandy earth itself!

"They were not lucky enough to have you with them," Vergil commented, turning the things over with the toe of his shoe. The Tyrean only grunted, waiting impatiently to ride on. Suddenly Vergil exclaimed, fell upon his knees to look closer. "Surely," he cried, astonished, "it was only from Naples that this striped yellow broadcloth came! And it could have been only in Naples that this shoulder-knot was tied!" His fingers pawed and combed the sand, came up with a blackened bauble. In a low and troubled tone he said, "And none but a Neopolitan would wear this particular charm against Evil Eye... I don't like this. I've heard of none from Naples venturing into Lybya before us. Who could they have been? Who *could* they have been?"

But Ebbled-Saphir from the stork's nest of his camel-saddle cried only, "Ride! Ride!"

The last oasis lay behind them, and none lay ahead; nothing lay ahead but more desert, and then the far-famed Mountains of the Moon, the Anthropophagi with tails, the dwarf-like Pygmies, and the distant Erythrian Sea.

"I go no further," said Ebbed-Saphir. The blue burnoose had slipped, showing his face, and it looked haggard.

"You engaged to bring me within sight of the castle," Vergil pointed out. "And unless you do so, all has gone for nothing."

The Tyrean lifted the stick with which he drove his camel, and he pointed. "I have kept my word," he said.

Sand had choked the castle's moat, and either time or lesser enemies had pushed down its battlements and turrets. Certain rude lineaments still persisted, becoming clearer as Vergil advanced. The curtain wall was still largely in place and, rather than go around and seek a proper gate which might prove to be no longer there, he entered through a wide breach in the curtain. There had been a garden in that place once—in a sense, there still was: bone-white trees cast slant, thin shadows over bone-brittle shrubs around a bone-dry pool. A fine white sandy dust lay over everything, and on its surface, small and delicate, Vergil saw the print of a naked foot.

While he mused and pondered, somewhere on the dry, thin air, a single note sounded, clear and pure. After it came another, and another, then a rill, a cascade of them, and formed into a tune of a music unknown and strangely beautiful to him. He followed it

as if it were the sound of a rill of coolest water to quench his long-unsated thirst.

Through a broken arch he paced the sound of music, and down a huge and winding flight of deep-set steps, dark and grateful after the days of days of naked sunlight, and so, in the lower courtyard below, there at last she was.

Lovely Laura, dulcimer in one hand quill in the other, kneeling and resting her coils of red-brown hair against the seamy sides of the castle's keeper, the huge and ancient four-armed Old One himself.

Whose eye was open upon the instant of Vergil's stepping through the inward-bending frame of the doorless doorway. Whose eye was huge and blazing-gold and shot about the white with tiny lines of red. Whose eye was set in the center of his broad and low and furrowed forehead. For eye other than this, he had none, nor had he space nor had he place for any other.

Chapter 2

No one had the right to call him *Monster*, Vergil's thought presently affirmed itself. The Cyclops's voice was deep and rich and slow and smooth; his words were civil and quite without threat or guile. A mind cultivated and distinctive lay behind that single glowing eye. He spoke of his

loneliness without much self-pity, and even recited a few lines of his own verse-making. Laura, plainly, liked him, had no fear at all of him. But he was old, old, preternaturally old, the last of his race, and lonely.

"Man, you've come a long way, and if you are too new upon my vision to be my friend, I need not, at least, be your enemy," he said. "But I will not give her up. Do you love her?"

"Yes," said Vergil.

Cyclops nodded his massy head, flowing with snow-white curls. "I love her, too," said Cyclops. "You have a world teeming with friends and fellows and kin, Man. I have none of such. Your duty and your pains, you'll think, have given you a claim upon her. Listen—Have I not already rescued her from the Troglodytes when all her so-called guards were killed? I have. And I do not believe that they were truly her guards at all. I think they were manstealers, taking her to be the bride of that one whose pyring-place is hard nearby. Oh—have I not often watched in anguish as some beautiful Man female was sacrificed to that one? And do I not hate that one? I do. What is your claim, Man Vergil, to mine?"

And Vergil said, softly, and not without respect, "Old One, my claim is not my claim alone. Laura has a mother and a brother and a great hope among the lands

of Men. Some Man will some day be her swain. You, Old One, never can."

"I know it, I know it. I am wiser than my brother Polyphemus, whose bootless wooing of a female not of our kind drove him near-mad. I do not think of Laura so. I would keep her with me, and I will keep her with me, as a lovely bird who might have perished on the burning sands, but found refuge here with me, instead. Her mother has had her long enough. Her mother has a son, her brother has a mother—and, likely enough, wives and cubs. I have none of these. I have only Laura, I do not remember when last I had anyone, and I will not give her up."

Laura herself remained silent, turning her gaze slowly from one to the other, saying nothing, showing nothing but a faint and passive smile; though now and then she plucked a chord upon her dulcimer. Vergil argued as earnest and persuasively as ever he remembered doing. But the Old One only said, "I will not give her up."

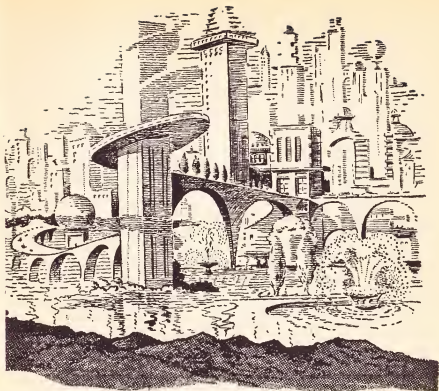
He said: "I was here when all you see was green and fair. I saw the Titans sporting like whales in great pools where now is nought but sand. The Titans, where are they? I saw the prides of sphynxes come to whelp in the caves along the river. The sphynxes, where are they? and

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SEVEN CAME BACK

By Clifford D. Simak



Illustrated by ARTHUR HUTAH

Every now and then the name Clifford D. Simak disappears from the contents page of every magazine in the field, and all his fans begin wondering if he has left science fiction for good. But then they remember that after each hiatus—we're in one now—he has come roaring back with first-rate yarns like the "City" series and "You'll Never Go Home Again," one of the most popular stories in the September, 1965 Fantastic, an issue which contained—all your letters agreed—nothing but top stories. And now, when you finish this current number, we think you'll be saying exactly the same thing about "Seven Came Back."

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THEY CAME out of the Martian night, six pitiful little creatures looking for a seventh.

They stopped at the edge of the campfire's lighted circle and stood there, staring at the three Earthmen with their owlish eyes.

The Earthmen froze at whatever they were doing.

"Quiet," said Wampus Smith, talking out of the corner of his bearded lips. "They'll come in if we don't make a move."

From far away came a faint, low moaning, floating in across the wilderness of sand and jagged pinnacles of rock and the great stone buttes.

The six stood just at the firelight's edge. The reflection of the flames touched their fur with highlights of red and blue and their bodies seemed to shimmer against the backdrop of the darkness on the desert.

"Venerables," Nelson said to Richard Webb across the fire.

Webb's breath caught in his throat. Here was a thing he had never hoped to see. A thing that no human being could ever hope to see.

Six of the Venerables of Mars walking in out of the desert and the darkness, standing in the firelight. There were many men, he knew, who would claim that the race was now extinct, hunted down, trapped out, hounded to extinction by the greed of the human sand men.

The six had seemed the same at first, six beings without a difference; but now, as Webb looked at them, he saw those minor points of bodily variation which marked each one of them as a separate individual. Six of them, Webb thought, and there should be seven.

Slowly they came forward, walking deeper into the campfire's circle. One by one they sat down on the sand facing the three men. No one said a word and the tension built up in the circle of the fire while far toward the north the thing kept up its keening, like a sharp, thin knife blade cutting through the night.

"Human glad," Wampus Smith said finally, talking in the patois of the desert. "He waited long."

One of the creatures spoke, its words half English, half Martian, all of it pure gibberish to the ear that did not know.

"We die," it said. "Human hurt for long. Human help some now. Now we die, human help?"

"Human sad," said Wampus and even while he tried to make his voice sad, there was elation in it, a trembling eagerness, a quivering as a hound will quiver when the scent is hot.

"We are six," the creature said. "Six not enough. We need another one. We do not find the seven, we die. Race die forever now."

"Not forever," Smith told them.

The venerable insisted on it.
"Forever. There other sixes.
No other seven."

"How can human help?"

"Human know. Human have
Seven somewhere?"

Wampus shook his head.

"Where we have Seven?"

"In cage. On Earth. For human
to see."

Wampus shook his head again.

"No Seven on Earth."

"There was one," Webb said
softly. "In a zoo."

"Zoo," said the creature, ton-
guing the unfamiliar word. "We
mean that. In cage."

"It died," said Webb. "Many
years ago."

"Human have one," the crea-
ture insisted. "Here on planet.
Hide out. To trade."

"No understand," said Wampus
but Webb knew from the way he
said it that he understood.

"Find Seven. Do not kill it. Hide
it knowing we come. Knowing we
pay."

"Pay? What pay?"

"City," said the creature. "Old
city."

"That's your city," Nelson said
to Webb. "The ruins you are hunt-
ing."

"Too bad we haven't got a Sev-
en," Wampus said. "We could
hand it over and they'd lead us to
the ruins."

"Human hurt for long," the
creature said. "Human kill all
Sevens. Have good fur. Women

human wear it. High pay for Seven
fur."

"Lord, yes," said Nelson.
"Fifty thousand for one at the
trading post. A cool half million
for a four-skin cape made up in
New York."

Webb sickened at the thought
of it, at the casual way in which
Nelson mentioned it. It was ille-
gal now, of course, but the law
had come too late to save the Ven-
erables. Although a law, come to
think of it, should not have been
necessary. A human being, in all
rightness. . . an intelligent form
of life, in all rightness, should
not hunt down and kill another
intelligent being to strip off its
pelt and sell it for fifty thousand
dollars.

"No Seven hid," Wampus was
saying. "Law says friends. No
dare hurt Seven. No dare hide
Seven."

"Law far off," said the creature.
"Human his own law."

"Not us," said Wampus. "We
don't monkey with the law."

And that's a laugh, thought
Webb.

"You help?" asked the crea-
ture.

"Try, maybe," Wampus told
them cagily. "No good, though.
You can't find. Human can't find."

"You find. We show city."

"We watch," said Wampus.
"Close watch. See Seven, bring
it. Where you be?"

"Canyon mouth."

"Good," said Wampus. "Deal?"

"Deal," said the creature.

Slowly the six of them got to their feet and turned back to the night again.

At the edge of the firelit circle they stopped. They spokesman turned back to the three men.

"By," he said.

"Good-by," said Wampus.

Then they were gone, back into the desert.

The three men sat and listened for a long time, not knowing what they listened for, but with ears taut to hear the slightest sound, trying to read out of sound some of the movement of life that surged all around the fire.

On Mars, thought Webb, one always listens. That is the survival price. To watch and listen and be still and quiet. And ruthless, too. To strike before another thing can strike. To see or hear a danger and be ready for it, be half a second quicker than it is quick. And to recognize that danger once you see or hear it.

Finally Nelson took up again the thing he had been doing when the six arrived, whetting his belt knife to a razor sharpness on a pocket whetstone.

The soft, sleek whirr of metal traveling over stone sounded like a heartbeat, a pulse that did not originate within the fire-light circle, but something that came out of the darkness, the pulse and

beat of the wilderness itself.

Wampus said: "It's too bad, Lars, that we don't know where to pick us up a Seven."

"Yeah," said Lars.

"Might turn a good deal," Wampus said. "Likely to be treasure in that old city. All the stories say so."

Nelson grunted. "Just stories."

"Stones," said Wampus "Stones so bright and polished they could put your eyes out. Sacks of them. Tire a man out just packing them away."

"Wouldn't need more than one load," Nelson declared. "Just one load would set you up for life."

Webb saw that both of them were looking at him, squinting their eyes against the firelight.

He said, almost angrily: "I don't know about the treasure."

"You heard the stories," Wampus said.

Webb nodded. "Let's say it this way. I'm not interested in the treasure. I don't expect to find any."

"Wouldn't mind if you did, would you?" Lars asked.

"It doesn't matter," Webb told him. "One way or the other."

"What do you know about this city?" Wampus demanded and it wasn't just conversation, it was a question asked with an answer expected, for a special purpose. "You been muttering around and dropping hints here and there

but you never came cold out and told us."

For a moment, Webb stared at the man. Then he spoke slowly. "Just this. I figured out where it might be. From a knowledge of geography and geology and some understanding of the rise of cultures. I figured where the grass and wood and water would have been when Mars was new and young. I tried to locate theoretically, the likeliest place for a civilization to arise. That's all there's to it."

"And you never thought of treasure?"

"I thought of finding out something about the Martian culture," Webb said. "How it rose and why it fell and what it might be like."

Wampus spat. "You aren't even sure there is a city," he said disgustedly.

"Not until just now," said Webb. "Now I know there is."

"From what them little critters said?"

Webb nodded. "From what they said. That's right."

Wampus grunted and was silent.

Webb watched the two across the campfire from him.

They think I'm soft, he thought. They despise me because I'm soft. They would leave me in a minute if it served their purpose or they'd put a knife into me without a second thought if that should serve their purpose. . . if there was some-

thing that I had they wanted.

There had been no choice, he realized. He could not have gone alone into this wilderness, for if he'd tried he probably wouldn't have lived beyond the second day. It took special knowledge to live here and a special technique and a certain kind of mind. A man had to develop a high survival factor to walk into Mars beyond the settlements.

And the settlements now were very far away. Somewhere to the east.

"Tomorrow," Wampus said, "we change directions. We go north instead of west."

Webb said nothing. His hand slid around cautiously and touched the gun at his belt, to make sure that it was there.

It had been a mistake to hire these two, he knew. But probably none of the others would have been better. They were all of a breed, a toughened, vicious band of men who roamed the wilderness, hunting, trapping, mining, taking what they found. Wampus and Nelson had been the only two at the post when he had arrived. All the other sand men had gone a week before, back to their hunting grounds.

At first they had been respectful, almost fawning. But as the days went on they felt surer of their ground and had grown insolent. Now Webb knew that he'd

been taken for a sucker. The two stayed at the post, he knew now, for no other reason than that they were without a grubstake. He was that grubstake. He supplied them with the trappings they needed to get back into the wilderness. Once he had been a grubstake, now he was a burden.

"I said," declared Wampus, "that tomorrow we go north."

Webb still said nothing.

"You heard me, didn't you?" asked Wampus.

"The first time," Webb said.

"We go north," said Wampus, "and we travel fast."

"You got a Seven staked out somewhere?"

Lars snickered. "Ain't that the damndest thing you ever heard of? Takes seven of them. Now with us, it just takes a man and woman."

"I asked you," said Webb to Wampus, "if you have a Seven caged up somewhere?"

"No," said Wampus. "We just go north, that's all."

"I hired you to take me west."

Wampus snarled at him. "I thought you'd say that, Webb. I just wanted to know exactly how you felt about it."

"You want to leave me stranded here," said Webb. "You took my money and agreed to guide me. Now you have something else to do. You either have a Seven or you think you know where you can find one. And if I knew and

talked, you would be in danger. So there's only one of two things that you can do with me. You can kill me or you can leave me and let something else do the job for you."

Lars said: "We're giving you a choice, ain't we?"

Webb looked at Wampus and the man nodded. "You got your choice, Webb."

He could go for his gun, of course. He could get one of them, most likely, before the other one got him. But there would be nothing gained. He would be just as dead as if they shot him out of hand. As far as that went he was as good as dead anyhow, for hundreds of miles stretched between him and the settlements and even if he were able to cross those many miles there was no guarantee that he could find the settlements.

"We're moving out right now," said Wampus. "Ain't smart to travel in the dark, but ain't the first time that we had to do it. We'll be up north in a day or two."

Lars nodded. "Once we get back to the settlements, Webb, we'll h'ist a drink to you."

Wampus joined in the spirit of the moment. "Good likker, Webb. We can afford good likker then."

Webb said nothing, did not move. He sat on the ground, relaxed.

And that, he told himself, was

the thing that scared him. That he could sit and know what was about to happen and be so unconcerned about it.

Perhaps it had been the miles of wilderness that made it possible, the harsh, raw land and the vicious life that moved across the land. . . the ever-hungering, ever-hunting life that prowled and stalked and killed. Here life was stripped to its essentials and one learned that the line between life and death was a thin line at best.

"Well," said Wampus finally, "what will it be, Webb."

"I think," said Webb, gravely, "I think I'll take my chance on living."

Lars clucked his tongue against his teeth. "Too bad," he said. "We was hoping it'd be the other way around. Then we could take all the stuff. As it is, we got to leave you some."

"You can always sneak back," said Webb, "and shoot me as I sit here. It would be an easy thing."

"That," said Wampus, "is not a bad idea."

Lars said: "Give me your gun, Webb. I'll throw it back to you when we leave. But we ain't taking a chance of you plugging us while we're getting ready."

Webb lifted his gun out of its holster and handed it over. Still sitting where he was, he watched them pack and stow the supplies into the wilderness wagon.

Finally it was done.

"We're leaving you plenty to last," Wampus told him. "More than enough."

"Probably," said Webb. "You figure I can't last very long."

"If it was me," said Wampus, "I'd take it quick and easy."

Webb sat for a long time, listening to the motor of the wagon until it was out of hearing, then waiting for the gun blast that would send him toppling face forward into the flaming campfire.

But finally he knew that it would not come. He piled more fuel on the fire and crawled into his sleeping bag.

In the morning he headed east, following backward along the tracks of the wilderness wagon. They'd guide him, he knew, for a week or so, but finally they would disappear, brushed out by drifting sand and by the action of the weak and whining wind that sometimes blew across the bleakness of the wilderness.

Anyhow, while he followed them he would know at least he was going in the right direction. Although more than likely he would be dead before they faded out, for the wilderness crawled with too much sudden death to be sure of living from one moment to the next.

He walked with the gun hanging in his hand, watching every

side, stopping at the top of the ridges to study the terrain in front of him before he moved down into it.

The unaccustomed pack which he had fashioned inexpertly out of his sleeping bag grew heavier as the day progressed and chafed his shoulders raw. The sun was warm...as warm as the night would be cold...and thirst mounted in his throat to choke him. Carefully he doled out sips of water from the scanty supply the two had left him.

He knew he would not get back. Somewhere between where he stood and the settlements he would die of lack of water or of an insect bite or beneath the jaws and fangs of some charging beast or from sheer exhaustion.

There was, once you thought it out, no reason why a man should try to get back...since there was utterly no chance that he would get back. But Webb didn't stop to reason it out; he set his face toward the east and followed the wagon tracks.

For there was a *humanness* in him that said he must try at least...that he must avoid death as long as he could. So on he went, going as far as he could go and avoiding death.

He spotted the ant colony in time to circle it, but he circled it too closely and the insects, catching scent of food within their grasp, streamed out after him. It

took a mile of running before he outdistanced them.

He saw the crouching beast camouflaged against the sand, where it was waiting for him, and shot it where it lay. Later in the day, when another monstrosity came tearing out from behind a rock outcropping, his bullet caught it between the eyes before it had covered half the distance.

For an hour he squatted, unmoving on the sand, while a huge insect that looked like a bumblebee, but wasn't, hunted for the thing that it had sighted only a moment before. But since it could recognize a thing through motion only, it finally gave up and went away. Webb stayed squatting for another half hour against the chance that it had not gone away, but was lurking somewhere watching for the motion it had sighted to take up again.

These times he avoided death, but he knew that the hour would come when he would not see a danger, or having seen it, would not move fast enough to stop it.

The mirages came to haunt him to steal his eyes from the things that he should be watching. Mirages that flickered in the sky, with their feet upon the ground. Tantalizing pictures of things that could not be on Mars, of places that might have been at one time...but that very long ago.

Mirages of broad, slow rivers

with the slant of sail upon them. Mirages of green forests that stretched across the hills and so clear, so, close that one could see the little clumps of wild flowers that grew among the trees. And in some of them the hint of snowcapped mountains, in a world that knew no mountains.

He kept a watch for fuel as he went along, hoping to find a cache of "embalmed" wood cropping out of the sand . . . wood left over from that dim age when these hills and valleys had been forest covered, wood that had escaped the ravages of time and now lay like the dried mummies of trees in the aridness of the desert.

But there was none to be found and he knew that more than likely he would have to spend a fireless night. He could not spend a night in the open without fire. If he tried it, he would be gobbled up an hour after twilight had set in.

He must somehow find shelter in one of the many caves of the weird rock formations that sprang out of the desert. Find a cave and clean out whatever might be in it, block its entrance with stones and boulders and sleep with gun in hand.

It had sounded easy when he thought of it, but while there were many caves, he was forced to reject them one by one since each of them had too large an opening to be closed against at-

tack. A cave, he knew, with an unclosed mouth, would be no better than a trap.

The sun was less than an hour high when he finally spotted a cave that would serve the purpose, located on a ledge of stone jutting out of a steep hill.

From the bottom he stood long minutes surveying the hill. Nothing moved. There was no telltale fleck of color.

Slowly, he started up, digging his feet into the shifting talus of the slope, fighting his way up foot by foot, stopping for long minutes to regain his breath and to survey the slope ahead.

Gaining the ledge, he moved cautiously toward the cave, gun leveled, for there was no telling what might come out of it.

He debated on his next move.

Flash his light inside to see what was there?

Or simply thrust his gun into the opening and spray the inside with its lethal charge?

There could be no squeamishness, he told himself. Better to kill a harmless thing than to run the chance of passing up a danger.

He heard no sound until the claws of the thing were scrabbling on the ledge behind him. He shot one quick glance over his shoulder and saw the beast almost on top of him, got the impression of gaping mouth and murderous fangs and tiny eyes that glinted with a stony cruelty.

There was no time to turn and fire. There was time for just one thing.

His legs moved like driving pistons, hurling his body at the cave. The stone lip of it caught his shoulder and ripped through his clothing, gashing his arm, but he was through, through and rolling free. Something brushed his face and he rolled over something that protested in a squeaking voice and off in one corner there was a thing that mewed quietly to itself.

On his knees, Webb swung his gun around to face the opening of the cave, saw the great bulk of the beast that had charged him trying to squeeze its way inside.

It backed away and then a great paw came in, feeling this way and that, hunting for the food that crouched inside the cave.

Mouths jabbered at Webb, a dozen voices speaking in the lingo of the desert and he heard them say:

"Human, human, kill, kill, kill."

Webb's gun spat and the paw went limp and was pulled slowly from the cave. The great grey body toppled and they heard it strike the slope below the ledge and go slithering away down the talus slope.

"Thanks, human," said the voices. "Thanks, human."

Slowly Webb sat down, cradling

the gun in his lap.

All around him he heard the stir of life.

Sweat broke out on his forehead and he felt moisture running from his armpits down his sides.

What was in the cave? What was in here with him?

That they had talked to him didn't mean a thing. Half the so-called animals of Mars could talk the desert lingo... a vocabulary of a few hundred words, part of them Earthian, part of them Martian, part of them God-knew-what.

For here on Mars many of the animals were not animals at all, but simply degenerating forms of life that at one time must have formed a complex civilization. The Venerables, who still retained some of the shape of bipeds, would have reached the highest culture, but there must have been many varying degrees of culture, living by compromise or by tolerance.

"Safe," a voice told him. "Trust. Cave law."

"Cave law?"

"Kill in cave... no. Kill outside cave... yes. Safe in cave."

"I no kill," said Webb. "Cave law good."

"Human know cave law?"

Webb said: "Human keep cave law."

"Good," the voice told him. "All safe now."

Webb relaxed. He slipped his gun into his holster and took off

his pack, laid it down alongside and rubbed his raw and blistered shoulders.

He could believe these things, he told himself. A thing so elemental and so simple as cave law was a thing that could be understood and trusted. It arose from a basic need, the need of the weaker life forms to forget their mutual differences and their mutual preying upon one another at the fall of night...the need to find a common sanctuary against the bigger and the more vicious and the lonely killers who took over with the going of the sun.

A voice said: "Come light. Human kill."

Another voice said: "Human keep cave law in dark. No cave law in light. Human kill come light."

"Human no kill come light," said Webb.

"All human kill," said one of the things. "Human kill for fur. Human kill for food. We fur. We food."

"This human never kill," said Webb. "This human friend."

"Friend?" one of them asked. "We not know friend. Explain friend."

Webb didn't try. There was no use, he knew. They could not understand the word. It was foreign to this wilderness.

At last he asked: "Rocks here?"

One of the voices answered:

"Rocks in cave. Human want rocks?"

"Pile in cave mouth," said Webb. "No killer get in."

They digested that for awhile. Finally one of them spoke up: "Rock good."

They brought rocks and stones and, with Webb helping them, wedged the cave mouth tight.

It was too dark to see the things, but they brushed against him as they worked and some of them were soft and furry and others had hides like crocodiles, that tore his skin as he brushed against them. And there was one that was soft and pulpy and gave him the creeps.

He settled down in one corner of the cave with his sleeping bag between his body and the wall. He would have liked to crawl into it, but that would have meant unpacking and if he unpacked his supplies, he knew, there'd be none come morning.

Perhaps, he reasoned, the body heat of all the things in here will keep the cave from getting too cold. Cold, yes, but not too cold for human life. It was, he knew, a gamble at best.

Sleep at night in friendship, kill one another and flee from one another with the coming of the dawn. Law, they called it. Cave law. Here was one for the books, here was something that was not even hinted at in all the arch-

aeological tomes that he had ever read.

And he had read them all. There was something here on Mars that fascinated him. A mystery and a loneliness, an emptiness and a retrogression that haunted him and finally sent him out to try to pierce some of that mystery, to try to hunt for the reason for that retrogression, to essay to measure the greatness of the culture that in some far dim period had come tumbling down.

There has been some great work done along that line. Axelson with his scholarly investigation of the symbolic water jugs and Mason's sometimes fumbling attempt to trace the great migrations. Then there was Smith, who had traveled the barren world for years jotting down the wind-blown stories whispered by the little degenerating things about an ancient greatness and a golden past. Myths, most of them, of course, but some place, somewhere lay the answer to the origin of the myths. Folklore does not leap full-blown from the mind; it starts with a fact and that fact is added to and the two facts are distorted and you have a myth. But at the bottom, back of all of it, is the starting point of fact.

So it was, so it must be with the myth that told about the great and glowing city that had stood above all other things of

Mars... a city that was known to the far ends of the planet.

A place of culture, Webb told himself, a place where all the achievements and all the dreams and every aspiration of the once-great planet would have come together.

And yet, in more than a hundred years of hunting and of digging, Earth's archaeologists had found no trace of any city, let alone that city of all cities. Kitchen middens and burial places and wretched huddling places where broken remnants of the great people had lived for a time... there were plenty of these. But no great city.

It must be somewhere, Webb was convinced. That myth could not lie, for it was told too often at too many different places by too many different animals that had once been people.

Mars fascinated me, he thought, and it still fascinates me, but now it will be the death of me... for there's death in its fascination. Death in the lonely stretches and death waiting on the buttes. Death in this cave, too, for they may kill me come the morning to prevent me killing them; they may keep their truce of the night just long enough to make an end of me.

The law of the cave? Some holdover from the ancient day, some memory of a now forgotten brotherhood? Or a device

necessitated by the evil days that had come when the brotherhood had broken?

He laid his head back against the rock and closed his eyes and thought...if they kill me, they kill me, but I will not kill them. For there has been too much human killing on the planet Mars. I will repay part of the debt at least. I will not kill the ones who took me in.

He remembered himself creeping along the ledge outside the cave, debating whether he should have a look first or stick in the muzzle of his gun and sweep the cave as a simple way of being sure there would be nothing there to harm him.

I did not know, he said. I did not know.

A soft furry body brushed against him and a voice spoke to him.

"Friend means no hurt? Friend mean no kill?"

"No hurt," said Webb. "No kill."

"You saw six?" the voice asked.

Webb jerked from the wall and sat very still.

"You saw six?" the voice was insistent.

"I saw six," said Webb.

"When?"

"One sun."

"Where six?"

"Canyon mouth," said Webb.

"Wait at canyon mouth."

"You hunt Seven?"

"No," said Webb. "I go home."

"Other humans?"

"They north," said Webb.

"They hunt Seven north."

"They kill Seven?"

"Catch seven," said Webb.

"Take Seven to six. See city."

"Six promise?"

"Six promise," said Webb.

"You good human. You friend human. You no kill Seven."

"No kill," insisted Webb.

"All humans kill. Kill Seven sure. Seven good fur. Much pay. Many Sevens die for human."

"Law says no kill," declared Webb. "Human law says Seven friend. No kill friend."

"Law? Like cave law?"

"Like cave law," said Webb.

"You good friend of Seven?"

"Good friend of all," said Webb.

"I Seven," said the voice.

Webb sat quietly and let the numbness clear out of his brain.

"Seven," he finally said. "You go canyon mouth. Find six. They wait. Human friend glad."

"Human friend want city," said the creature. "Seven friend to human. Human find Seven. Human see city. Six promise."

Webb almost laughed aloud in bitterness. Here, at last, the chance that he had hoped might come. Here, at last, the thing that he had wanted, the thing he had come to Mars to do. And he simply couldn't do it.

"Human no go," he said. "Human die. No food. No water. Human die."

"We care for human," Seven told him. "No friend human before. All kill humans. Friend human come. We care for it."

Webb was silent for a while, thinking.

Then he asked: "You give human food? You find human water?"

"Take care," said Seven.

"How Seven know I saw six?"

"Human tell. Human think. Seven know."

So that was it...telepathy. Some vestige of a former power, some attribute of a magnificent culture, not quite forgotten yet. How many of the other creatures in this cave would have it, too?

"Human go with Seven?" Seven asked.

"Human go," said Webb.

He might as well, he told himself. Going east, back toward the settlements, was no solution to his problem. He knew he'd never reach the settlements. His food would run out. His water would run out. Some beast would catch him and make a meal of him. He didn't have a chance.

Going with the little creature that stood beside him in the darkness of the cave, he might have a chance. Not too good a chance, perhaps, but at least a chance. There would be food and water...or at least a chance of food

and water. There would be another helping him to watch for the sudden death that roamed the wilderness. Another one to warn him, to help him recognize the danger.

"Human cold," said Seven.

"Cold," admitted Webb.

"One cold," said Seven. "Two warm."

The furry thing crawled into his arms, put its arms around his body. After a moment, he put his arms around it.

"Sleep," said Seven. "Sleep."

Webb ate the last of his food and the Seven Venerables told him: "We care."

"Human die," Webb insisted. "No food. Human die."

"We take care," the seven little creatures told him, standing in a row. "Later we take care."

So he took it to mean that there was no food for him now, but later there would be.

They took up the march again.

It was an interminable thing, that march. A thing to make a man cry out in his sleep. A thing to shiver over when they had been lucky enough to find wood and sat hunched around the fire. Day after endless day of sand and rock, of crawling up to a high ridge and plunging down the other side, of slogging through the heat across the level land that had been sea bottom in the days long gone.

It became a song, a drum beat. A three-note marching cadence that rang through the human's head, an endless thing that hammered in his brain through the day and stayed with him hours after they had stopped for night. Until he was dizzy with it, until his brain was drugged with the hammer of it, so that his eyes refused to focus and the gun bead was a fuzzy globe when he had to use the weapon against the crawling things and charging things and flying things that came at them out of nowhere.

Always there were the mirages, the everlasting mirages of Mars that seemed to lie just beneath the surface of reality. Flickering pictures painted in the sky the water and the trees and the long green sweep of grass that Mars had not known for countless centuries. As if, Webb told himself, the past were very close behind them, as if the past might still exist and was trying to catch up, reluctant to be left behind in the march of time.

He lost count of the days and steeled himself against the speculation of how much longer it might be, until it seemed that it would go on forever, that they would never stop, that they would face each morning the barren wilderness they must stagger through until the fall of night.

He drank the last of the water and reminded them he could not

live very long without it.

"Later," they told him. "Water later."

That was the day they came to the city and there, deep in a tunnel far beneath the topmost ruins there was water, water dripping, drop by slow and tantalizing drop from a broken pipe. Dripping water and that was a wondrous thing on Mars.

The seven drank sparingly since they had been steeled for century upon century to get along with little water, until they had adapted themselves to get along with little water and it was no hardship for them. But Webb lay for hours beside the broken pipe, holding cupped hands for a little to collect before he lapped it down, lying there in the coolness that was a blessed thing.

He slept and awoke and drank again and he was rested and was no longer thirsty, but his body cried for food. And there was no food nor one to get him food. For the little ones were gone.

They will come back, he said. They are gone for just a little while and will be back again. They have gone to get me food and they will bring it to me. And he thought very kindly of them.

He picked his way upward through the tunnel down which they'd come and so at last came to the ruins that lay on the hill that thrust upward from the surrounding country so that when

one stood on the hill's top, there was miles of distance, dropping away on every side.

There wasn't much that one could see of the ruined city. It would have been entirely possible to have walked past the hill and not have known the city was there. During thousands of years it had crumbled and fallen in upon itself and some of it had dissolved to dust and the sand had crept in and covered it and sifted among its fragments until it simply was a part of the hill.

Here and there Webb found broken fragments of chiseled masonry and here and there a shard of pottery, but a man could have walked past these, if he had not been looking, and taken them for no more than another rock scattered among the trillions of other fragmentary rocks littered on the surface of the planet.

The tunnel, he found, led down into the bowels of the fallen city, into the burial mound of the fallen greatness and the vanished glory of a proud people whose descendants now scuttled animal-like in the ancient deserts and talked in an idiom that was no more than a memory of the literacy that must have flourished once in the city on the hill.

In the tunnel Webb found evidence of solid blocks of carved stone, broken columns, paving blocks and something that seemed at one time to have been

a beautifully executed statue.

At the end of the tunnel, he cupped his hands at the pipe and drank again, then went back to the surface and sat on the ground beside the tunnel mouth and stared out across the emptiness of Mars.

It would take power and tools and many men to uncover and sift the evidence of the city. It would take years of painstaking, scholarly work . . . and he didn't even have a shovel. And worst of all he had no time. For if the seven did not show up with food he would one day go down into the darkness of the tunnel and there eventually join his human dust with the ancient dust of this alien world.

There had been a shovel, remembered, and Wampus and Lars, when they deserted him, had left it for him. A rare consideration, surely, he told himself. But of the supplies which he had carried away from the campfire that long gone morning there were just two things left, his sleeping bag and the pistol at his belt. All else he could get along without, those two were things that he had to have.

An archaeologist, he thought. An archaeologist sitting on top of the greatest find that any archaeologist had ever made and not able to do a single thing about it.

Wampus and Lars had thought

that there would be treasure here. And there was no certain treasure, no treasure revealed and waiting for the hands of men to take. He had thought of glory and there was no glory. He had thought of knowledge and without a shovel and some time there simply was no knowledge. No knowledge beyond the bare knowing that he had been right, that the city did exist.

And yet there was certain other knowledge gained along the way. The knowledge that the seven types of the Venerables did still in fact exist, that from this existence the race might still continue despite the guns and snares and the greed and guile of Earthmen who had hunted Seven for its fifty thousand dollar pelt.

Seven little creatures, seven different sexes. All of them essential to the continuance of the race. Six little creatures looking for the seventh and he had found the seventh. Because he had found the seventh, because he had been the messenger, there would be at least one new generation of the Venerables to carry on the race.

What use, he thought, to carry on a race that had failed its purpose?

He shook his head.

You can't play God, he said. You can't presume to judge. There either is a purpose in all things or there's no purpose in

anything, and who is there to know?

There either is purpose that I reached this city or there is no purpose. There is a purpose that I may die here or it is possible that my dying here will be no more than another random factor in the great machination of pure chance that moves the planets through their courses and brings a man homeward at the end of day.

And there was another knowledge . . . the knowledge of the endless reaches and the savage loneliness that was the Martian wilderness. The knowledge of that and the queer, almost non-human detachment that it fused into the human soul.

Lessons, he thought.

The lesson that one man is an insignificant flyspeck crawling across the face of eternity. The lesson that one life is a relatively unimportant thing when it stands face to face with the over-riding reality of the miracle of all creation.

He got up and stood at his full height and knew his insignificance and his humility in the empty sweep of land that fell away on every side and in the arching sky that vaulted overhead from horizon to horizon and the utter silence that lay upon the land and sky.

Starving was a lonely and an awful business.

Some deaths are swift and clean.

But starving is not one of these.

The seven did not come. Webb waited for them, and because he still felt kindly toward them, he found excuses for them. They did not realize, he told himself, how short a time a man may go without nourishment. The strange mating, he told himself, involving seven personalities, probably was a complicated procedure and might take a great deal more time than one usually associated with such phenomena. Or something might have happened to them, they might be having trouble of their own. As soon as they had worked it out, they would come, and they would bring him food.

So he starved with kindly thoughts and with a great deal more patience than a man under similar circumstances might be expected to.

And he found, even when he felt the lassitude of under-nourishment creeping along his muscles and his bones, even when the sharp pangs of hunger had settled to a gnawing horror that never left him, even when he slept, that his mind was not affected by the ravages that his body was undergoing; that his brain, apparently, was sharpened by the lack of food, that it seemed to step aside from his tortured body and become a separate entity that drew in upon itself and

knotted all its faculties into a hard-bound bundle that was scarcely aware of external factors.

He sat for long hours upon a polished rock, perhaps part of that once proud city, which he found just a few yards from the tunnel mouth, and stared out across the sun-washed wilderness which stretched for miles toward a horizon that it never seemed to reach. He sought for purpose with a sharp-edged mind that probed at the roots of existence and of happenstance and sought to evolve out of the random factors that moved beneath the surface of the universe's orderliness some evidence of a pattern that would be understandable to the human mind. Often he thought he had it, but it always slid away from him like quicksilver escaping from a clutching hand.

If Man ever was to find the answer, he knew, it must be in a place like this, where there was no distraction, where there was a distance and a barrenness that built up to a vast impersonality which emphasized and underscored the inconsequence of the thinker. For if the thinker introduced himself as a factor out of proportion to the fact, then the whole problem was distorted and the equation, if equation there be, never could be solved.

At first he had tried to hunt animals for food, but strangely,

while the rest of the wilderness swarmed with vicious life that hunted timid life, the area around the city was virtually deserted, as if some one had drawn a sacred chalk mark around it. On his second day of hunting he killed a small thing that on Earth could have been a mouse. He built a fire and cooked it and later hunted up the sun-dried skin and sucked and chewed at it for the small nourishment that it might contain. But after that he did not kill a thing, for there was nothing to be killed.

Finally he came to know the seven would not come, that they never had intended to come, that they had deserted him exactly as his two human companions had deserted him before. He had been made a fool, he knew, not once, but twice.

He should have kept on going east after he had started. He should not have come back with seven to find the other six who waited at the canyon's mouth.

You might have made it to the settlements, he told himself. You just might have made it. Just possibly have made it.

East. East toward the settlements.

Human history is a trying . . . a trying for the impossible, and attaining it. There is no logic, for if humanity had waited upon logic it still would be a cave-lining and an earth-bound race.

Try, said Webb, not knowing exactly what he said.

He walked down the hill again and started out across the wilderness, heading toward the east. For there was no hope upon the hill and there was hope toward the east. .

A mile from the base of the hill, he fell. He staggered, falling and rising, for another mile. He crawled a hundred yards. It was there the seven found him.

"Food!" he cried at them and he had a feeling that although he cried it in his mind there was no sound in his mouth. "Food! Water!"

"We take care," they said, and lifted him, holding him in a sitting position.

"Life," Seven told him, "is in many husks. Like nested boxes that fit inside each other. You live one and you peel it off and there's another life."

"Wrong," said Webb. "You do not talk like that. Your thought does not flow like that. There is something wrong."

"There is an inner man," said seven. "There are many inner men."

"The subconscious," said Webb and while he said it in his mind, he knew that no word, no sound came out of his mouth. And he knew now, too, that no words were coming out of Seven's mouth, that here were words that could not be expressed in the

patois of the desert, that here were thoughts and knowledge that could not belong to a thing that scuttled, fearsome, through the Martian wilderness.

"You peel an old life off and you step forth in a new and shining life," said Seven, "but you must know the way. There is a certain technique and a certain preparation. If there is no preparation and no technique, the job is often bungled."

"Preparation," said Webb. "I have no preparation. I do not know about this."

"You are prepared," said Seven. "You were not before, but now you are."

"I thought," said Webb.

"You thought," said Seven, "and you found a partial answer. Well-fed, earth-bound, arrogant, there would have been no answer. You found humility."

"I do not know the technique," said Webb. "I do not . . ."

"We know the technique," Seven said. "We take care."

The hilltop where the dead city lay shimmered and there was a mirage on it. Out of the dead mound of its dust rose the pinnacles and spires, the buttresses and the flying bridges of a city that shone with color and with light; out of the sand came the blaze of garden beds of flowers and the tall avenues of trees and a music that came from the slender bell towers.

There was grass beneath his feet instead of sand blazing with the heat of the Martian noon. There was a path that led up the terraces of the hill toward the wonder city that reared upon its heights. There was the distant sound of laughter and there were flecks of color moving on the distant streets and along the walls and through the garden paths.

Webb swung around and the seven were not there. Nor was the wilderness. The land stretched away on every hand and it was not wilderness, but a breath-taking place with groves of trees and roads and flowing water courses.

He turned back to the city again and watched the movement of the flecks of color.

"People," he said.

And Seven's voice, coming to him from somewhere, from elsewhere, said:

"People from the many planets. And from beyond the plantes. And some of your own people you will find among them. For you are not the first."

Filled with wonder, a wonder that was fading, that would be entirely faded before he reached the city, Webb started walking up the path.

Wampus Smith and Lars Nelson came to the hill many days late. They came on foot because the wilderness wagon had broken

down. They came without food except the little food they could kill along the way and they came with no more than a few drops of water sloshing in their canteens and there was no water to be found.

There, a short distance from the foot of the hill, they found the sun-dried mummy of a man face downward on the sand and when they turned him over they saw who he was.

Wampus stared across the body at Lars.

"How did he get here?" he croaked.

"I don't know," said Lars. "He never could have made it, not knowing the country and on foot. And he wouldn't have traveled this way anyhow. He would have headed east, back to the settlements."

They pawed through his clothing and found nothing. But they took his gun, for the charges in

their own were running very low.

"What's the use," said Lars.

"We can't make it, Wampus."

"We can try," said Wampus.

Above the hill a mirage flickered . . . a city with shining turrets and dizzy pinnacles and rows of trees and fountains that flashed with leaping water. To their ears came the sound, or seemed to come, the sound of many bells.

Wampus spat with lips that were cracked and dried, spat with no saliva in his mouth.

"Them damn mirages," he said.

"They drive a man half crazy."

"They seem so close," said Lars. "So close and real. As if they were someplace else and were trying to break through."

Wampus spat again. "Let's get going," he said.

The two men turned toward the east and as they moved, they left staggering, uneven tracks through the sand of Mars.

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THE THIRD GUEST

By
B. TRAVEN

*All anyone seems to know about B. Traven—author of the famous *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *Stories by the Man Nobody Knows* (Regency, 1961)—is that "Traven" is not his real name, that he lives somewhere in Mexico, and that he has no intention of violating his privacy merely to satisfy the curiosity of the world at large. A very skimpy biography that, one that inquisitive readers will have to put up with—apparently for good—because the author shows no signs of relenting. But as long as he keeps sending us an occasional masterpiece—such as "The Third Guest"—we, for one, wouldn't even think of complaining.*

Illustrator: Tom O'Sullivan



MACARIO, the village wood-chopper, had one overwhelming desire which he had nourished for fifteen years.

It was not riches he wanted, nor a well-built house instead of that ramshackle old hut in which he lived with his wife and his eleven children who wore rags and were always hungry. What he craved more than anything in this world—what he might have traded his very soul for—was to have a roast turkey all for himself combined with the opportunity to

eat it in peace, deep in the woods unseen by his ever-hungry children, and entirely alone.

His stomach never fully satisfied, he would leave home before sunrise every morning in the year, weekday and Sunday alike, rain or shine. He would disappear into the woods and by nightfall bring back a load of chopped wood carried on his back.

That load, meaning a full day's job, would sell for one bit, sometimes even less than that. During the rainy season, though, when competition was slow, he would get as much as two bits now and then for his load of fuel.

Two bits meant a fortune to his wife, who looked even more starved than her husband, and who was known in the village as the Woman with the Sad Eyes.

Arriving home after sunset, Macario would throw off his pack with a heavy groan, stagger into his hut and drop with an audible bump upon a low crudely-made chair brought to the equally crude table by one of the children.

There he would spread both his arms upon the table and say with a tired voice: "Oh, Mother, I am tired and hungry, what have we for supper?"

"Black beans, green chile, tortillas, salt and lemon tea," his wife would answer.

It was always the same menu with no variation whatever. Knowing the answer long before he was

home, he merely asked so as to say something and, by so doing, prevent his children from believing him merely a dumb animal.

When supper was set before him in earthen vessels, he would be profoundly asleep. His wife would shake him: "Father, supper's on the table."

"We thank our good Lord for what he allows us poor sinners," he would pray, and immediately start eating.

Yet hardly would he swallow a few mouthfuls of beans when he would note the eyes of his children resting on his face and hands, watching him that he might not eat too much so that they might get a little second helping since the first had been so very small. He would cease eating and drink only the tea, brewed of *zacate de limon*, sweetened with a little chunk of *piloncillo*.

Having emptied the earthen pot he would, with the back of his hand, wipe his mouth, moan pitifully, and in a prayerful voice say: "Oh, dear Lord in heaven, if only once in all my dreary life I could have a roast turkey all for myself, I would then die happily and rest in peace until called for the final reckoning, Amen."

Frequently he would not say that much, yet he would never fail to say at least: "Oh, good Lord, if only once I could have a roast turkey all for myself."

His children had heard that

lamentation so often that none of them paid attention to it any longer, considering it their father's particular way of saying Grace after supper.

He might just as well have prayed that he would like to be given one thousand doubloons, for there was not the faintest likelihood that he would ever come into the possession of roast chicken, let alone a heavy roast turkey whose meat no child of his had ever tasted.

His wife, the most faithful and the most abnegating companion a man would wish for, had every reason to consider him a very good man. He never beat her; he worked as hard as any man could. On Saturday nights only he would take a three-centavo's worth nip of mezcal, and no matter how little money she had, she would never fail to buy him that squeeze of a drink. She would buy it at the general store because he would get less than half the size for the same money if he bought the drink in the village tavern.

Realizing how good a husband he was, how hard he worked to keep the family going, how much he, in his own way, loved her and the children, the wife began saving up any penny she could spare of the little money she earned doing odd jobs for other villagers who were slightly better off than she was.

Having thus saved penny by penny for three long years, which had seemed to her an eternity, she at last could lay her hands on the heaviest turkey brought to the market.

Almost exploding with joy and happiness, she took it home while the children were not in. She hid the fowl so that none would see it. Not a word she said when her husband came home that night, tired, worn-out and hungry as always, and as usual praying to heaven for his roast turkey.

The children were sent to bed early. She feared not that her husband might see what she was about, for he had already fallen asleep at the table and, as always, half an hour later he would drowsily rise and drag himself to his cot upon which he would drop as if clubbed down.

If there ever was prepared a carefully selected turkey with a true feeling of happiness and profound joy guiding the hands and the taste of a cook, this one certainly was. The wife worked all through the night to get the turkey ready before sunrise.

Macario got up for his day's work and sat down at the table for his lean breakfast. He never bothered saying *Good Morning* and was not used to hearing it said by his wife or anybody in the house.

If something was amiss on the

table or if he could not find his machete or the ropes which he needed for tying up the chopped wood, he would just mumble something, hardly opening his lips. As his utterings were few and these few always limited to what was absolutely necessary, his wife would understand him without ever making a mistake.

Now he rose, ready to leave.

He came out, and while standing for a few seconds by the door of his shack looking at the misty gray of the coming day, his wife placed herself before him as though in his way. For a brief moment he gazed at her, slightly bewildered because of that strange attitude of hers. And there she handed him an old basket in which was the roast turkey, trimmed, stuffed and garnished, all prettily wrapped up in fresh green banana leaves.

"There now, there, dear husband, there's the roast turkey you've been praying for during so many long years. Take it along with you to the deepest and densest part of the woods where nobody will disturb you and where you can eat it all alone. Hurry now before the children smell it and get aware of that precious meal, for then you could not resist giving it to them. Hurry along."

He looked at her with his tired eyes and nodded. *Please* and *Thanks* were words he never used. It did not even occur to him to let his wife have just one little bite

of that turkey because his mind, not fit to handle more than one thought at a time, was at this instant exclusively occupied with his wife's urging to hurry and run away with his turkey lest the children get up before he could leave.

He took his time finding himself a well-hidden place deep in the woods and as he, because of so much wandering about, had become sufficiently hungry by now, he was ready to eat his turkey with genuine gusto. He made his seat on the ground very comfortable, washed his hands in a brook near by, and everything was as perfect as it should be at such a solemn occasion — that is, the fulfillment of a man's prayer said daily for an almost uncountable number of years.

With a sigh of utter happiness, he leaned his back against the hollow trunk of a heavy tree, took the turkey out of the basket, spread the huge banana leaves before him on the ground and laid the bird upon them with a gesture as if he were offering it to the gods. He had in mind to lie down after the meal and sleep the whole day through and so turn this day, his Saint's day, to a real holiday — the first in his life since he could think for himself.

On looking at the turkey so well prepared, and taking in that sweet aroma of a carefully and skillfully

roasted turkey, he muttered in sheer admiration: "I must say this much of her, she's a great and wonderful cook. It is sad that she never has the chance to show her skill."

That was the most profound praise and the highest expression of thanks he could think of. His wife would have burst with pride and she would have been happy beyond words had he only once in his life said that in her presence. This, though, he would never have been able to do, for in her presence such words would simply refuse to pass his lips.

Holding the bird's breast down with his left hand, he firmly grabbed with his right one of the turkey's thick legs to tear it off.

And while he was trying to do so, he suddenly noted two feet standing right before him, hardly two yards away.

He raised his eyes up along the black, tightly fitting pants which covered low riding boots as far down as the ankles and found, to his surprise, a Charro in full dress, watching him tear off the turkey's leg.

The Charro wore a sombrero of immense size, richly trimmed with gold laces. His short leather coat was adorned with the richest gold, silver and multi-colored silk embroidery one could imagine. To the outside seams of the Charro's black trousers and reaching from

the belt down to where they came to rest upon the heavy spurs of pure silver, a row of gold coins was sewn on. A slight move the Charro would make now and then while he was speaking to Macario caused these gold coins to send forth a low, sweet-sounding tinkle. He had a black moustachio, the Charro had, and a beard like a goat's. His eyes were pitch black, very narrow and piercing so that one might virtually believe them needles.

When Macario's eyes reached his face, the stranger smiled, thin-lipped and somewhat malicious. He evidently thought his smile a most charming one, by which any human, man or woman, would be enticed beyond help.

"What do you say, friend, about a fair bite of your tasty turkey for a hungry horseman," he said in a metallic voice. "See, friend, I've had a long ride all through the night and now I'm nearly starved and so, please, for hell's sake, invite me to partake of your lunch."

"It's not lunch in the first place," Macario corrected, holding on to his turkey as if he thought that bird might fly away at any moment. "And in the second place, it's my holiday dinner and I won't part with it for anybody, whoever he may be. Do you understand?"

"No, I don't. Look here, friend, I'll give you my heavy silver

spurs just for that thick leg you've grabbed," the Charro bargained, moistening his lips with a thick dark red tongue which, had it been forked, might have been that of a snake.

"I have no use for spurs whether they are of iron, brass, silver or gold trimmed with diamonds all over, because I have no horse to ride on." Macario judged the value of his roast turkey as only a man would who had waited for that meal almost eighteen years.

"Well then, friend, if it is worth that much to you, I'll cut off all these gold coins which you see dangling from my trousers and I'll give them to you for a half breast of that turkey of yours. What about that?"

"That money would do me no good. If I spent only one single coin they'd clap me in jail right away and there torture me until I'd tell them where I stole it, and after that they'd chop off one hand of mine for being a thief. What could I, a wood chopper, do with one hand less when, in fact, I could use four if only the Lord had been kind enough to let me have that many."

Macario, utterly unconcerned over the Charro's insistence, once more tried to tear off the leg and start eating when the visitor interrupted him again: "See here, friend, I own these woods, the whole woods and all the woods around here, and I'll give you

these woods in exchange for just one wing of your turkey and a fistful of the fillings. All these woods, think of it."

"Now you're lying, stranger. These woods are not yours, they're the Lord's, or I couldn't chop in here and provide the villagers with fuel. And if they were your woods and you'd give them to me for a gift or in payment for a part of my turkey, I wouldn't be any richer anyhow because I'd have to chop then just as I do now."

Said the Charro: "Now listen, my good friend —"

"Now you listen," Macario broke in impatiently. "You aren't my good friend and I'm not your good friend and I hope I never will be your good friend as long as God saves my soul. Understand that. And now go back to hell where you came from and let me eat my holiday dinner in peace."

The Charro made a horribly obscene grimace, swore at Macario and limped off, cursing the world and all mankind.

Macario looked after him, shook his head and said to himself: "Who'd expect to meet such funny jesters in these woods? Well, I suppose it takes all kinds of people and creatures to make it truly our Lord's world."

He sighed and laid his left hand on the turkey's breast as he had done before and with his right grasped one of the fowl's legs.

And again he noted two feet standing right before him at the same spot where, only a half minute earlier, the Charro had been standing.

Ordinary huaraches, well-worn as though by a man who has wandered a long and difficult road, covered these two feet. Their owner was quite obviously very tired and weary, for his feet seemed to sag at the arches.

Macario looked up and met a very kind face, thinly bearded. The wanderer was dressed in very old, but well washed, white cotton pants and a shirt of the same stuff, and he looked not very different from the ordinary Indian peasant of the country.

The wanderer's eyes held Macario's as though by a charm and Macario became aware that in this pilgrim's heart were combined all the goodnesses and kindnesses of earth and heaven, and in each of the wanderer's eyes he saw a little golden sun, and each little golden sun seemed to be but a little golden hole through which one might crawl right into heaven and see Godfather Himself in all His glory.

With a voice that sounded like a huge organ playing from a distance far away, the wanderer said: "Give unto me, my good neighbor, as I shall give unto you. I am hungry, very hungry indeed. For see, my beloved brother, I have come a long way. Pray, let



me have that leg which you are holding and I shall truly and verily bless you for it. Just that leg, nothing else. It will satisfy my hunger and it will give me new strength, for very long still is my way before reaching my father's house."

"You're a very kind man, wanderer, the kindest of men that ever were, that are today, and that are to come," Macario said, as though he was praying before the image of the Holy Virgin.

"So I beg of you, my good neighbor, give me just one half of the bird's breast, you certainly will not miss it much."

"Oh, my beloved pilgrim," Macario explained as if he were speaking to the archbishop whom he had never seen and did not know but whom he believed the highest of the highest on earth. "If you, my Lord, really mean to say that I won't miss it much, I shall answer that I feel terribly hurt in my soul because I can't say anything better to you, kind man, but that you are very much mistaken. I know I should never say such a thing to you for it comes close to blasphemy, yet I can't help it, I must say it even should that cost me my right to enter heaven because your eyes and your voice make me tell the truth.

"For you see, your Lordship, I must not miss even the tiniest little morsel of this turkey. This

turkey, please, oh please, do understand, my Lord, was given me as a whole and was meant to be eaten as a whole. It would no longer be a whole turkey were I to give away just a little bit not even the size of a fingernail. A whole turkey — it was what I have yearned for all my life, and not to have it now after a life-time of praying for it would destroy all the happiness of my good and faithful wife who has sacrificed herself beyond words to make me that great gift. So, please, my Lord and Master, understand a poor sinner's mind. Please, I pray you, understand."

And the wanderer looked at Macario and said unto him: "I do understand you, Macario, my noble brother and good neighbor, I verily do understand you. Be blessed for ever and ever and eat your turkey in peace. I shall go now, and on passing through your village I shall go near your hut where I shall bless your good wife and all your children. Be with the Lord. Goodbye."

Not once while he had made these speeches to the Charro and to the Wanderer had it occurred to Macario, who rarely spoke more than fifty words a day, to stop to think what had made him so eloquent — why it was that he, in the depths of the woods, could speak as freely and easily as the minister in church, and used

words and expressions which he had never known before. It all came to him without his realizing what was happening to him.

He followed the pilgrim with his eyes until he could see him no longer.

He shook his head sadly.

"I most surely feel sorry about him. He was so very tired and hungry. But I simply could do nothing else. I would have insulted my dear wife. Besides, I cannot spare a leg or part of the breast, come what may, for it would no longer be a whole turkey then."

And again he seized the turkey's leg to tear it off and start his dinner when, again, he noted two feet standing before him and at the same spot the others had stood a while ago.

These two feet were standing in old-fashioned sandals, and Macario thought that the man must be a foreigner from far-off lands, for he had never seen sandals like these before.

He looked up and stared at the hungriest face he had ever believed possible. That face had no flesh. It was all bone. And all bone were the hands and the legs of the visitor. His eyes seemed to be but two very black holes hidden deep in the fleshless face. The mouth consisted of two rows of strong teeth, bared of lips.

He was dressed in a faded blu-

ish-white flowing mantle which, as Macario noted, was neither cotton nor silk nor wool nor any fabric he knew. He held a long staff in one hand for support.

From the stranger's belt, which was rather carelessly wound around his waist, a mahogany box, scratched all over, with a clock ticking audibly inside, was dangling on a bit of a string.

It was that box hanging there instead of the hour-glass which Macario had expected that confused him at first as to what the new visitor's social standing in the world might be.

The newcomer now spoke. He spoke with a voice that sounded like two sticks clattering one against the other.

"I am very hungry, compadre, very, very hungry."

"You don't need to tell me. I can see that, compadre," Macario asserted, not in the least afraid of the stranger's horrible appearance.

"Since you can see that and since you have no doubt that I need something substantial in my stomach, would you mind giving me that leg of the turkey you are holding?"

Macario gave forth a desperate groan, shrugged and lifted up his arms in utter helplessness.

"Well," he said, with mourning in his voice, "what can a poor mortal do against fate? I've been caught at last. There's no way out

any more. It would have been a great adventure, the good God in heaven knows it, but fate doesn't want it that way. I shall never have a whole turkey for myself, never, never and never, so what can I do? I must give in. All right, compadre, get your belly's fill; I know what hunger is like. Sit down, hungry man, sit down. Half the turkey's yours and be welcome to it."

"Oh, compadre, that is fine, very fine," said the hungry man, sitting down on the ground opposite Macario and widening his row of teeth as if he were trying to grin.

Macario could not make out for sure what the stranger meant by that grin, whether it was an expression of thanks or a gesture of joy at having been saved from a sure death by starvation.

"I'll cut the bird in two," Macario said, in a great hurry now lest another visitor might come up and make his own part a third only. "Once I've cut the bird in two, you just look the other way and I'll lay my machete flat between the two halves and you tell which half you want, that next to the edge or that next to the back. Fair enough, Bone Man?"

"Fair enough, compadre."

So they had dinner together. And a mighty jolly dinner it was, with much clever talking on the part of the guest and with much

laughter on the side of the host.

"You know, compadre," Macario presently said, "at first I was slightly upset because you didn't fit in the picture of you I had in my mind. That box of mahogany with the clock in it which you carry hanging from your belt, confused me quite a bit and made it hard for me to recognize you promptly. What has become of your hour-glass, if it isn't a secret to know?"

"No secret at all, no secret at all. You may tell the world if it itches you to do so. You see, it was like this. There was a big battle in full swing somewhere around Europe, which is the fattest spot on earth for me next to China. And I tell you, compadre, that battle kept me on the run as if I were still a youngster. Hither and thither I had to dart until I went nearly mad and was exhausted entirely. So, naturally, I could not take proper care of myself as I usually do to keep me fit. Well, it seems a British cannon ball fired in the wrong direction by a half-drunken limey smashed my cherished hour-glass so completely that it could not be mended again by old smith Pluto who likes doing such odd jobs. I looked around and around everywhere, but I could not buy a satisfactory new one, since they are made no longer save for decorations on mantelpieces and, like all such silly knick-knacks, useless.

I tried to swipe one in museums, but to my horror I discovered that they were all fakes, not a genuine instrument among them."

A chunk of tender white meat which he chewed at this instant let him forget his story for a while. Remembering that he had started to tell something without finishing it, he now asked: "Oh, well, where was I with my tale, compadre?"

"The hour-glasses in all the museums were all fakes wherever you went to try one out."

"Right. Yes, now isn't it a pity that they build such wonderful great museums around things which are only fakes? Coming back to the point: there I was without a correctly adjusted hour-glass, and many mistakes were bound to happen. Then it came to pass not long afterwards that I visited a captain sitting in his cabin of a ship that was rapidly sinking away under him and with the crew all off in boats. He, the captain I mean, having refused to leave his ship, had hoisted the Union Jack and was stubbornly sticking by his ship whatever might happen to her, as would become a loyal British captain. There he now sat in his cabin, writing up his log-book.

"When he saw me right before him, he smiled at me and said: 'Well, Mr. Bone Man — Sir, I mean, seems my time is up.' 'It is, skipper,' I confirmed, also smiling

to make it easier for him and make him forget the dear ones he would leave behind. He looked at his chronometer and said: 'Please, sir, just allow me fifteen seconds more to jot down the actual time in my log-book.' 'Granted,' I answered. And he was all happiness that he could write in the correct time. Seeing him so very happy, I said: 'What about it, Cap'n, would you mind giving me your chronometer? I reckon you can spare it now since you won't have any use for it any longer, because aboard the ship you will sail from now on you won't have to worry about time at all. You see, Cap'n, as a matter of fact my hour-glass was smashed by a British cannon ball fired by a drunken British gunner in the wrong direction, and so I think it only fair and just that I should have in exchange for my hour-glass a British-made chronometer.'"

"Oh, so that's what you call that funny-looking little clock — a chronometer. I didn't know that," Macario broke in.

"Yes, that's what it is called," the hungry man admitted with a grin of his bared teeth. "The only difference is that a chronometer is a hundred times more exact in telling the correct time than an ordinary watch or a clock. Well, compadre, where was I?"

"You asked the ship's master for the chro . . ."

"... nometer. Exactly. So when I asked him to let me have that pretty time-piece he said: 'Now, you are asking for just the very thing, for it happens that this chronometer is my personal property and I can dispose of it any way it damn pleases me. If it were the company's I would have to deny you that beautiful companion of mine. It was perfectly adjusted a few days before we went on this rather eventful voyage and I can assure you, Mr. Bone Man, that you can rely on this instrument a hundred times better than on any of your old-fashioned glasses.' So I took it with me on leaving the rapidly sinking ship. And that's how I came to carry this chronometer instead of that shabby out-dated hour-glass I used to have in by-gone days.

"And I can tell you one thing, compadre, this British-made gadget works so perfectly that, since I got hold of it, I have never yet missed a single date, whereas before that many a man for whom the coffin or the basket or an old sack had already been brought into the house, escaped me. And I tell you, compadre, escaping me is bad business for everybody concerned, and I lose a good lot of my reputation whenever something of this sort happens. But it won't happen anymore now."

So they talked, told one another jokes, dry ones and juicy

ones, laughed a great deal together, and felt as jolly as old friends meeting each other after a long separation.

The Bone Man certainly liked the turkey, and he said a huge amount of good words in praise of the wife who had cooked the bird so tastily.

Entirely taken in by that excellent meal he, now and then, would become absent-minded and forget himself, and try to lick his lips which were not there with a tongue which he did not have.

But Macario understood that gesture and regarded it as a sure and unmistakable sign that his guest was satisfied and happy in his own unearthly way.

"You have had two visitors before today, or have you?" the Bone Man asked in the course of their conversation.

"True. How did you know, compadre?"

"How I know? I have to know what is going on around the world. You see, I am the chief of the secret police of — of — well, you know the Big Boss. I am not allowed to mention His name. Did you know them — those two visitors, I mean?"

"Sure I did. What do you think I am, a heathen?"

"The first one was what we call our main trouble."

"The devil, I knew him all right," Macario said confidently.

"That fellow can come to me in any disguise and I'd know him anywhere. This time he tried looking like a Charro, but smart as he thinks he is, he had made a few mistakes in dressing up, as foreigners are apt to do. So it wasn't hard for me to see that he was a counterfeit Charro."

"Why didn't you give him a small piece of your turkey then, since you knew who he was. That hop-about-the-world can do you a great deal of harm, you know."

"Not to me, compadre. I know all his tricks and he won't get me. Why should I give him part of my turkey? He had so much money that he had not pockets enough to put it in and so had to sew it outside on his pants. At the next inn he passes he can buy if he wishes a half dozen roast turkeys and a couple of young roast pigs besides. He didn't need a leg or a wing of my turkey."

"But the second visitor was — well, you know Whom I refer to. Did you recognize Him?"

"Who wouldn't? I am a Christian. I would know him anywhere. I felt awfully sorry that I had to deny Him a little bite, for I could see that He was very hungry and terribly in need of some food. But who am I, poor sinner, to give our Lord a little part of my turkey. His father owns the whole world and all the birds because He made everything. He

may give His Son as many roast turkeys as the Son wants to eat. What is more, our Lord, who can feed five thousand hungry people with two fishes and five ordinary loaves of bread all during the same afternoon, and satisfy their hunger and have still a few dozens of sacks full of crumbs left over — well, compadre, I thought that He Himself can feed well on just one little leaf of grass if He is really hungry. I would have considered it a really grave sin giving Him a leg of my turkey. And another thing, He Who can turn water into wine just by saying so, can just as well cause that little ant walking here on the ground and picking up a tiny morsel, to turn into a roast turkey with all the fillings and trimmings and sauces known in heaven.

"Who am I, a poor wood-chopper with eleven brats to feed, to humiliate our Lord by making Him accept a leg of my roast turkey touched with my unclean hands? I am a faithful son of the church, and as such I must respect the power and might and dignity of our Lord."

"That's an interesting philosophy, compadre," the Bone Man said. "I can see that your mind is strong, and that your brain functions perfectly in the direction of that human virtue which is strongly concerned with safeguarding one's property."

"I've never heard of that,

compadre." Macario's face was a blank.

"The only thing that baffles me now is your attitude toward me, compadre." The Bone Man was cleaning up a wing bone with his strong teeth as he spoke. "What I would like to hear is why did you give me half of your turkey when just a few minutes before you had denied as little as a leg or a wing to the devil and also to our Lord?"

"Ah," Macario exclaimed, throwing up both his hands to emphasize the exclamation. And "Ah," he said once more, "that's different; with you that's very different. For one thing, I'm a human being and I know what hunger is and how it feels to be starved. Besides, I've never heard as yet that you have any power to create or to perform miracles. You're just an obedient servant of the Supreme Judge. Nor have you any money to buy food with, for you have no pockets in your clothes. It's true I had the heart to deny my wife a bite of that turkey which she prepared for me with all her love put in for extra spices. I had the heart because, lean as she is, she doesn't look one-tenth as hungry as you do. I was able to put up enough will power to decline my poor children, always crying for food, a few morsels of my roast turkey. Yet, no matter how hungry my

children are, none of them looks one-hundredth as hungry as you do."

"Now, compadre, come, come. Don't try to sell me that," the dinner guest clattered, making visible efforts to smile. "Out with the truth. I can bear it. You said, 'For one thing' when you started explaining. Now tell me the other thing as well. I can stand the truth."

"All right then," Macario said quietly. "You see, compadre, I realized the very moment I saw you standing before me that I would not have any time left to eat as little as one leg, let alone the whole turkey. So I said to myself, as long as he eats too, I will be able to eat, and so I made it fifty-fifty."

The visitor turned his deep eye-holes in great surprise upon his host. Then he started grinning and soon he broke into a thundering laughter which sounded like heavy clubs drumming a huge empty barrel. "By the great Jupiter, compadre, you are a shrewd one, indeed you are. I cannot remember having met such a clever and quick-witted man for a long time. You deserve, you truly and verily deserve to be selected by me for a little service, a little service which will make my lonely existence now and then less boresome to me. You see, compadre, I like playing jokes on men now and then as my mood

will have it. Jokes that don't hurt anybody, and they amuse me and help me to feel that my job is, somehow, less unproductive, if you know what I mean."

"I guess I know how you mean it."

"Do you know what I am going to do so as to pay honestly for the dinner you offered me?"

"What, compadre? Oh, please, sir, your lordship, don't make me your assistant. Not that, please, anything else you wish, but not your helper."

"I don't need an assistant and I have never had one. No, I have another idea. I shall make you a doctor, a great doctor who will outwit all those haughty learned physicians and super-specialists who are always playing their nasty little tricks with the idea that they can put one over on me. That's what I am going to do: make you a doctor. And I promise you that your roast turkey shall be paid for a million-fold."

Speaking thus he rose, walked some twenty feet away, looked searchingly at the ground, at that time of the year dry and sandy, and called back: "Compadre, bring your *guaje* bottle over here. Yes, I mean that bottle of yours which looks as though it were of some strange variety of pumpkin. But first pour out all the water which is still in it."

Macario obeyed and came close to where his guest waited for him.

The visitor spat seven times upon the dry ground, remained quiet for a few minutes and then, all of a sudden, crystal-clear water sputtered out of that sandy soil.

"Hand me your bottle," the Bone Man said.

He knelt down by the little pool just forming and with one hand spooned up the water and poured it into Macario's *guaje* bottle. This procedure took quite some time, for the mouth of the bottle was extremely small.

When the bottle, which held about a quart, was full, the Bone Man, still kneeling by the pool, tapped the soil with one hand and the water immediately disappeared from view.

"Let's go back to our eating place, compadre," the visitor suggested.

Once more they sat down together. The Bone Man handed Macario the bottle. "This liquid in your bottle will make you the greatest doctor known in the present century. One drop of this fluid will cure any sickness, and I include any sickness known as a fatal and as an incurable one. But mind, and mind well, compadre, once the last drop is gone, there will be no more of that medicine and your curing power will exist no longer."

Macario was not at all excited over that great gift. "I don't know if I should take that present

from you. You see, compadre, I've been happy in my own way. True it is that I've been hungry always all through my life; always I've been tired, always been struggling with no end in view. Yet that's the way with people in my position. We accept that life because it was given us. It's for that reason that we feel happy in our way — because we always try making the best of something very bad and apparently hopeless. This turkey we ate together today has been the very peak of my life's ambition. I never wanted to go up higher in all my desires than to have one roast turkey with all the trimmings and fillings all for myself, and be allowed to eat it in peace and all alone with no hungry children's eyes counting every little bite going into my hungry stomach."

"That's just why. You didn't have your roast turkey all by yourself. You gave me half of it, and so your life's ambition is still not accomplished."

"You know, compadre, that I had no choice in that matter."

"I suppose you are right. Anyway, whatever the reason, your one and only desire in this world has not yet been satisfied. You must admit that. So, if you wish to buy another turkey without waiting for it another fifteen or twenty years, you will have to cure somebody to get the money with which to buy that turkey."

"I never thought of that," Macario muttered, as if speaking to himself. "I surely must have a whole roast turkey all for myself, come what may, or I'll die a most unhappy man."

"Of course, compadre, there are a few more things which you ought to know before we part for a while."

"Yes, what is it, tell me."

"Wherever you are called to a patient you will see me there also."

On hearing that, unprepared as he was for the catch, Macario got the shivers.

"Don't get frightened, compadre, no one else will see me; and mind you well what I am going to tell you now. If you see me standing at your patient's feet, just put one drop of your medicine into a cup or glass of fresh water, make him drink it, and before two days are gone he will be all right again, sane and sound for a good long time to come."

"I understand," Macario nodded pensively.

"But if," the Bone Man continued, "you see me standing at your patient's head, do not use the medicine; for if you see me standing thus, he will die no matter what you do and regardless of how many brilliant doctors attempt to snatch him away from me. In that case do not use the medicine I gave you because it

will be wasted and be only a loss to you. You must realize, compadre, that this divine power to select the one that has to leave the world — while some other, be he old or a scoundrel, shall continue on earth — this power of selection I cannot transfer to a human being who may err or become corrupt. That's why the final decision in each particular case must remain with me, and you must obey and respect my selection."

"I won't forget that, sir," Macario answered.

"You had better not. Well, now, compadre, let us say good-bye. The dinner was excellent, exquisite I should call it, if you understand that word. I must admit, and I admit it with great pleasure, that I have had an enjoyable time in your company. By all means, that dinner you gave me will restore my strength for another hundred years. Would that when my need for another meal is as urgent as it was today, I may find as generous a host as you have been. Much obliged, compadre. A thousand thanks. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, compadre."

Macario spoke as though he were waking from a heavy dream, yet immediately he realized that he had not been dreaming.

Before him on the ground were the well-picked bones of that half turkey which his guest had eaten

with so much delight.

Mechanically he cleaned up all the morsels which had dropped and stuffed them into his mouth, so that nothing should be wasted, all the while trying to find the meaning of the several adventures that were crammed into the limited space of his mind.

The thing most difficult for him to understand was how it had been possible for him to talk so much and talk what he believed was very clever as, in his opinion, only a learned man could do. But then he knew that when in the woods he always had very clever thoughts; only at home in the presence of his wife and children he had no thoughts whatever and his mouth was as if glued and it cost him much labor to get out of it one full sentence.

Soon he got tired and presently lay down under a tree to sleep the rest of the day, as he had promised himself that he would after his holiday dinner.

No fuel did he bring back that night.

His wife had not a red cent in the house with which to buy food the next day.

Yet she did not reproach him for having been lazy, as in fact she never criticized anything he did or did not. The truth was that she felt immensely happy to be alive. For, during the day, and about noon, when she was busy in the yard washing the children's

rays, a strange golden ray which, so it appeared, came not from the sun, but from an unknown source, had touched her whole body, while at the same time she had heard inside her heart a sweet music as if played by a huge organ from far, far above the earth.

From that moment on and all the whole day she had felt as though lifted from the ground, and her mind had been at peace as she could not remember having ever felt before. Nothing of this phenomenon did she tell her husband. She kept it to herself like a very sacred property all her own.

When she served supper there was still some reflection of that golden ray visible on her face.

Even her husband noted it on giving her a casual glance. But he said nothing, for he was still heavily occupied with his own fortunes of the day.

Before he went to sleep that night, later than usual, for he had slept well during the day out in the woods, his wife asked him timidly: "How was the turkey, dear husband?"

"What do you think was the matter with it since you ask me, how it was? What do you mean? Was there something wrong with it? It was quite all right as far as I could judge, with the little experience I've had eating roast turkey."

With not a single word did he mention his visitors.

When he had turned about to go to his cot, she looked at him, watching his face sidewise and thoughtfully. Something was new in him, something had come over him. Never before had he talked that much to her at one breath.

Next day was a hungry one for the whole family. Their breakfast, including that of Macario's, was always lean. Yet this morning his wife had to make it smaller still, for it had to be stretched into two more meals.

Soon Marcario was through with the few mouthfuls of black beans seasoned with green chile and a pot of *atole* for a drink. Complain he did not because he realized that the blame was on him.

He took up his machete, his ax and his ropes and stepped out into the misty morning.

Considering the way he went about his usual hard task of chopping wood, he might as well have forgotten about the precious medicine and all that went with it.

Only a few paces had he gone when his wife called after him: "Husband, your water bottle."

This reminded him like a flash that the whole adventure of the day before might after all not have been a dream but reality. Last night, on thinking of the happenings, he had reached the

conclusion that it might have been but sort of an imagination caused by a stomach not used to being filled up by a half roast turkey.

"It's still full of water," the wife said, bringing the *guaje* bottle out and shaking it. "Shall I pour the old water out and put in fresh water?" she asked, while playing with the cork cut from a corn cob.

"Yes, I know, woman, it's still full," Macario answered, not a bit afraid that his wife might be too hasty and spill the miraculous liquid away. "Yesterday I drank from the little brook. Just give me the bottle full as it is. The water is good; I got it out there in the woods."

On his way to work and some fair distance away from his hut which was the last at this side of the village, he hid the bottle in the dense brushes, partly covering it with soil.

That night he brought home one of the biggest loads of heavy fine dry fuel such as he had not delivered for many months. It was sold at three bits, a price unheard of, and was sold that same night on the first call the older boy made. So the family felt like having come into a million.

Next day Macario went about his job as usual.

On the night before he had told his wife casually that he had broken his *guaje* bottle because a heavy trunk had dropped upon it, and she had to give him an-

other one of the several they kept in the house. These bottles cost them nothing, for the older boys discovered them growing wild in the bush somewhere.

Again he brought home that night a good load of chopped wood, yet this time he found his family in a pitiful distress.

His wife, her face swollen, her eyes red from long crying, rushed at him the moment he came in. "Reginito is dying, my poor little baby, Regino, will be gone in a half hour," and she broke into a heart-breaking lamentation, tears streaming down her face.

Helpless and stupidly he looked at her the way he always looked if something in the house happened which was out of the gloomy routine by which this home of his was run. When his wife stepped aside, he noted that there were present several neighbors, all women, partly standing, partly squatting close to the cot on which the child had been bedded.

His was the poorest family in the village, yet they were among the best liked for their questions, their honesty, their modesty, and because of that unearned virtue that the poor are always liked better than the rich anywhere and by everybody.

Those women, in their neighborly zeal to help the so very poor Macario, and on hearing of the

child's being sick, had brought with them all sorts of herbs, roots, bits of bark as used by the villagers in cases of sickness. The village had no doctor and no drug store and for that reason, perhaps, it also had no undertaker.

Every woman had brought a different kind of medicinal herb or remedy. And every one of the women made a different suggestion as to what should be done to save the child. For hours that little creature had been tortured with scores of different treatments and had been given teas brewed from roots, herbs and ground snake-bones mixed with a powder obtained from charred toads.

"He ate too much," one woman said, seeing his father coming to the child's bed.

"His bowels are all twisted up, there's no help," another one corrected the first one.

"Wrong, compadre, it's an infection of the stomach, he is done for."

The one next to her observed: "We've done everything possible, he can't live another hour. One of our kids died the same way. I know it. I can see by his little shrunken face that he is winged already for his flight to heaven, little angel, poor little angel." She broke into a loud sob.

Not in the least minding the women's chatter, Macario looked at his little son whom he seemed

to love best of all as he was the youngest of the bunch. He liked his innocent smile and felt happy in his way when the little tyke would now and then sit on his lap for a few minutes and play with his tiny fingers upon the man's face. Often it occurred to Macario that the only reason for being alive rested with the fact that there always would be a little baby around the house, smiling at him innocently and beating his nose and cheeks with his little fists.

The child was dying; no doubt of that. The mirror held by a woman before the baby's mouth showed no mark of breath. His heartbeat could practically no longer be noted by one or the other woman who would press her ear upon the child's chest.

The father stood there and gazed at his baby without knowing whether he ought to step closer still and touch the little face or remain where he was, or say something to his wife or to one of the other women, or talk to the children who were timidly crowded into one corner of the room where they all sat as if they were guilty of the baby's misfortune. They had had no dinner and they felt sure there would be no supper tonight as their mother was in a horrible state of mind.

Macario turned slowly about, walked to the door and went out

into the darkness of the night.

Not knowing what to do or where to go since his home was all in a turmoil, tired as he was from his very hard day's labor, and feeling as though he were to sink down on his knees, he took, as if automatically, the path which led to the woods — his realm where he was sure to find the quiet of which he was so badly in need.

Arriving at the spot where, in the early morning, he had buried the *guaje* bottle, he stopped, searched for the exact place, took out the bottle, and quickly as he had not moved in many years, ran back to his hut.

"Give me a cup filled with fresh clean water," he ordered in a loud and determined voice on opening the door.

His wife hurried as if given new hope, and in a few seconds she brought an earthen cup of water.

"Now, folks, you leave the room. Get out of here, all of you, and leave me alone with that son of mine. I'll see what I can do about it."

"No use, Macario, can't you see he has only a few minutes left? You'd better kneel down and say the prayers with us while he is breathing his last, so that his soul may be saved," one of the women told him.

"You heard what I said and you do as you've been advised," he said, sharply cutting off any further protest.

Never before had his wife heard him speak in such a harsh, commanding manner. Almost afraid of him, she urged the women out of the hut.

They were all gone.

Macario closed the door behind them, turned to the cot, and when he looked up he saw his bony dinner guest standing opposite him, the cot with the child in it between the two.

The visitor stared at him out of his deep dark holes he had for eyes, hesitated, shrugged, and slowly, as though still weighing his decision, moved toward the baby's feet, remaining there for the next few seconds while the father poured a generous dose of the medicine into the cup filled with water.

Seeing his partner shaking his head in disapproval, Macario remembered that only one drop would have sufficed for the cure. Yet, it was too late now, and the liquid could not be returned to the bottle, for it was already mixed with fresh water.

Macario lifted the baby's head, forced the little mouth open and let the drink trickle into it, taking care that nothing was spilled. To his great joy he noted that the baby, once his mouth had been moistened, started to swallow voluntarily. Soon he had taken the whole to its last drop.

Hardly could the medicine have

reached his stomach when the child began to breathe freely. Color returned slowly but visibly to his pale face, and he moved his head in search of better comfort.

The father waited a few minutes longer, and seeing that the baby was recovering miraculously fast, he called in his wife.

Only one look did the mother give her baby when she fell to her knees by the cot and cried out loud: "Glory be to God and the Holy Virgin. I thank you, my Lord in Heaven; my little baby will live."

Hearing the mother's excited outburst, all the women who had been waiting outdoors rushed in, and seeing what had happened while the father had been alone with his son they crossed themselves, gasped and stared at Macario as if noting his existence for the first time and as though he were a stranger in the house.

One hour later the whole village was assembled at Macario's to see with their own eyes whether it was true what the women, running about the village, were telling the people.

The baby, his cheeks rosy, his little fists pressed close to his chin, was profoundly asleep, and anybody could see that all danger was past.

Next morning Macario got up at his usual time, sat down at the table for his breakfast, looked for

his machete, ax and ropes and, taciturn as always, left home to go out to the woods and there chop fuel for the villagers. The bottle with the medicine he took along with him and buried at the same spot from which he had taken it the night before.

So he went about his job for the next six weeks when one night, on returning home, he found Ramiro waiting for him. Ramiro asked him, please, to come around to his place and see what he might do about his wife who had been sick for several days and was now sinking fast.

Ramiro, the principal storekeeper and merchant of the whole community and the richest man in the municipality, explained that he had heard of Macario's curing powers and that he would like him to try his talents on his young wife.

"Fetch me a little bottle, a very little glass bottle from your store. I'll wait for you here and think over what I perhaps could do for your wife."

Ramiro brought the bottle, a medicine bottle, holding one ounce of fluid.

"What are you going to do with the bottle, Macario?"

"Leave that to me, Ramiro. You just go home and wait for me. I have to see your wife first before I can say whether or not I can save her. She'll hold on all right until I come, don't worry over

that. In the meantime, I will go out in the fields and look for some herbs which I know to be good medicine."

He went into the night, searched for his bottle, filled the little crystal flask half full with the precious liquid, buried the bottle again and walked to Ramiro's who lived in one of the three one-story brick houses the village boasted.

He found the woman rapidly nearing her end, and she was as close to it as had been his little son.

Ramiro looked at Macario's eyes. Macario shrugged for an answer. After a while he said: "You'd better go out now and leave me alone with your wife."

Ramiro obeyed. Yet, extremely jealous of his young and very pretty wife, pretty even now when near her death, he peeped through a hole in the door to watch Macario's doings.

Macario, already close to the door, turned abruptly with the intention to ask for a glass of fresh water.

Ramiro, his eyes still pressed to the door, was not quick enough in getting away and so, when Macario, by a resolute pull, opened the door, Ramiro fell full length into the room.

"Not very decent of you, Ramiro," Macario said, comprehending what the jealous man had been about. "Just for that I

should decline giving your young wife back to you. You don't deserve her, you know that, don't you?"

He stopped in great surprise.

He could not understand himself what had come over him this very minute. Why he, the poorest and humblest man in the village, a common wood-chopper, had dared to speak to the haughtiest and richest man, the millionaire of the village, in a manner which the judge at the county court would hardly have risked. But seeing Ramiro, that mighty and powerful man, standing before him humiliated and with the gesture of a beggar trembling with fear that Macario might refuse to heal his wife, Macario had suddenly become aware that he had become a great power himself, a great doctor of whom that arrogant Ramiro expected miracles.

Very humble now, Ramiro begged Macario's forgiveness for having spied upon him, and in the most pitiful way he pleaded with him to save his wife, who was about to give him his first child in less than four months.

"How much would you ask for giving her back to me sane and healthy like she was before?"

"I do not sell my medicine for prices, I do not set prices. It's you, Ramiro, who have to make the price. Only you can know what your wife is worth to you. So name the price yourself."

"Would ten doubloons do, my dear good Macario?"

"That's what your wife is worth to you? Only ten doubloons?"

"Don't take it that way, dear Macario. Of course she means far more to me than all my money. Money I can make again any day that God will allow me to live. But once my wife is gone where would I find another one like her? Not in this world. I'll make it one hundred doubloons then, only, please, save her."

Macario knew Ramiro well; only too well did he know him. Both had been born and raised in that village. Ramiro was the son of the richest merchant of the village as he himself was the richest man today — whereas Macario was the son of the poorest day laborer in the community as he himself was now the poorest wood-chopper with the biggest family of the whole village to support. And as he knew Ramiro so very well, nobody would have to tell him that, once the merchant's wife was cured, her husband would try to chisel down on the one hundred doubloons as much as he possibly could and if Macario did not yield there would be a long and nasty fight between the two men for many years to come.

Realizing all that, Macario now said: "I'll take the ten doubloons which you offered me first."

"Oh, thank you, Macario, I thank you, indeed I do, and not

for cutting down on the price but that you're willing to cure her. I shall never forget what you have done for us, I'm sure, I shall never forget it. I only hope that the unborn will be safe also."

"It surely will," Macario said, assured of his success since he had seen his bony dinner companion standing where he liked best to see him.

"Now, bring me a glass of fresh water," he told Ramiro.

The water was brought and Macario counseled the merchant: "Don't you dare peep in again for, mind you, if you do I might fail and it will be all your fault. So remember, no spying, no peeping. Now, leave me alone with the patient."

This time Macario was extremely careful in not spending more than exactly one drop of the valuable liquid. As hard as he could he even tried to cut that one drop into two halves. By his talk with Ramiro he had suddenly understood how much his medicine was really worth if such a proud and rich man as Ramiro would humble himself before the wood-chopper for no other reason than that his wife might be cured by the poor woodman's medicine.

In realizing that, he visioned what his future might be like if he would forget about his wood-chopping and stick by his medicine exclusively. Naturally enough,

the quintessence of that future was an unlimited supply of roast turkeys any time he wanted them.

His one-time dinner guest, seeing him cutting the one drop in half, nodded approvingly when Macario looked at him for advice.

Two days after Ramiro's wife had recovered fully, she told her husband that she was positively sure that the baby had not been hurt in the least by her sickness, as she could feel him all right.

Ramiro in his great joy handed Macario the ten gold pieces, not only without prattling over that high price but with a hundred thanks thrown in. He invited the whole Macario family to his store where everyone, husband, wife, and all the children, was allowed to take as much home as everybody could carry in his arms. Then he threw a splendid dinner to which the Macarios were invited as his guests of honor.

Macario built a real house now for his family, bought some pieces of good land and began cultivating them, because Ramiro had loaned him one hundred doubloons at very low interest.

Ramiro had done so not solely out of gratitude. He was too shrewd a businessman to loan out money without thinking of fat gains. He realized that Macario had a great future ahead of him, and that it would be a very sound investment to keep Macario in the village and make people come

here to see him, rather than have him take up his residence in a city. The more visitors the village would have on account of Macario's fame, the more important would grow Ramiro's business. In expectation of this development in the village's future, Ramiro added to his various lines in business that of banking.

He gambled fast on Macario and he won. He won far beyond his most fantastic dreams.

It was he who did all the advertising and all the propaganda to draw attention to Macario's great gift. Hardly had he sent out a few letters to business friends in the city, than sick people flocked to the village in the hope of being cured of their maladies, many having been declared incurable by learned physicians.

Soon Macario could build himself a mansion. He bought up all the land around and converted it into gardens and parks. His children were sent to schools and universities as far as Paris and Salamanca.

As his one-time dinner guest had promised him, so it came to pass. Macario's half turkey was paid for a million-fold.

Regardless of his riches and his fame, Macario remained honest and uncorrupted. Anyone who wanted to be cured was asked how much his health was worth to him. And as Macario had done

in his first case, so he did ever after in all other cases — that is, the patients or their relatives would decide the price.

A poor man or woman who had no more to offer than one silver peso or a pig or a rooster, he would heal just as well as the rich who, in many instances, had made prices as high as twenty thousand doubloons. He cured men and women of the highest nobility, many of whom had crossed the ocean and had come from Spain, Italy, Portugal, France and other countries and who had come for no other reason than to see him and consult him.

Whoever came to consult him would be told frankly that he could do nothing to save him, if Macario saw the Bone Man stand at the patient's head. Nothing did he charge for that consultation.

People, whoever they were, accepted his final verdict without discussion. No longer would they try arguing with him, once he had told them that they were beyond help.

More or less half the people consulting him were saved; the other half were claimed by his partner. It happened often for weeks at a time that he would not meet one patient whom he could cure, because his dinner guest would decide differently. Such weeks the people in the land

called "his low-power periods".

While at the beginning of his practice he was able to cut a drop of his precious medicine into two, he soon learned to cut each drop into eight. He acquired all devices known then by which a drop might be divided up into practically an infinite number of mites. Yet, no matter how much he cut and divided, regardless of how cleverly he administered each dose to make it as small as possible and yet retain its effectiveness, the medicine had frightfully fast become scarcer and scarcer.

He had drained the *guaje* bottle during the first month of his practice, once he had observed the true value of the liquid. He knew that a *guaje* bottle will not only soak into its walls a certain amount of any fluid it may hold, but worse, the liquid will evaporate, and rather fast, through the bottle's walls. It is for that reason that water kept in a *guaje* bottle of the kind natives use will stay always cool even should the day be very hot.

So he had taken out the medicine and poured it into bottles of dark glass, tightly sealed.

The last little bottle had been opened months ago, and one day Macario noted to his horror that there were only about two drops left. Consequently, he decided to make it known that he would retire from practice and cure nobody any longer.



By now he had become really old and felt that he had a right to spend the last few years of his life in peace.

These last two drops he meant to keep for members of his family exclusively, and especially for his beloved wife, whom he had had to cure already two times during the last ten years and whom he was afraid he might lose — a loss which would be very difficult for him to bear.

Just about that same time it so happened that the eight-year-old son of the viceroy, don Juan Marquez de Casafuerte, the highest personage of New Spain, fell sick.

The best doctors were called for help. None could do anything for the boy. The doctors admitted frankly that this boy had been stricken by a sickness not known to medical science.

The viceroy had heard of Macario. Who hadn't? But he owed it to his dignity, education and high social and political position to consider Macario a quack, the more so since he was called thus by every doctor who had a title from an accredited university.

The child's mother, however, less given to dignity when the life of her son was at stake, made life for the viceroy so miserable that finally he saw no other way out of his dilemma than to send for Macario.

Macario disliked traveling and rarely left his village, and then only for short trips. Yet, an order given by the viceroy himself had to be obeyed under penalty of death.

So he had to go.

Brought before the viceroy he was told what was expected of him.

The viceroy, still not believing in the so-called miracles which Macario was said to have performed, spoke to him in the same way as he would have spoken to any native wood-chopper.

"It was not I who called you, understand that, my good man. Her Highness, la Marquesa, insisted on bringing you here to save our son whom, so it appears, no learned medico can cure. I make it quite clear to you that in case you actually save our child, one-fourth of the fortune which I hold here in New Spain shall be yours. Besides, you may ask anything you see here in my palace, whatever it is that catches your fancy and whatever its value. That will be yours also. Apart from all that, I personally will hand you a license which will entitle you to practice medicine anywhere in New Spain with the same rights and privileges as any learned medico, and you shall be given a special letter with my seal on it which will give you immunity for life against any arrest

by police or soldiers, and which will safeguard you against any unjustified court action. I believe, my good man, that this is a royal payment for your service."

Macario nodded, yet said nothing.

The viceroi went on: "What I promised you in the case that you save our son follows exactly the suggestions made by Her Highness, la Marquesa, my wife, and what I promise I always keep."

The Marquesa stopped for a few seconds, as if waiting for Macario to say something.

Macario, however, said nothing and made no gesture.

"But now, listen to my own suggestions," the viceroy continued. "If you should fail to save our son, I shall hand you over to the High Court of the Inquisition, charging you with the practice of witchcraft under pact with the devil, and you shall be burned alive at the stake on the Alameda and in public."

Again the viceroy stopped to see what expression his threat had made upon Macario.

Macario paled, but still said nothing.

"Have you understood in full what I have said?"

"I have, Your Highness," Macario said briefly, trembling slightly as he attempted to make an awkward bow.

"Now, I personally shall show

you to our sick child. Follow me."

They entered the boy's room where two nurses were in attendance, merely watching the child's slow decline, unable to do anything save keep him comfortable. His mother was not present. She had, by the doctor's order, been confined to her room as she was close to a complete breakdown.

The boy was resting in a bed becoming his age, a light bed made of fine wood, though not looking rich.

Macario went close and looked around for a sign of his dinner guest.

Slightly, so as not to make his gesture seem suspicious, he touched a special little pocket in his trousers to be sure he had the crystal flask with the last two drops of medicine about him.

Now he said: "Will you, Your Highness, I pray, leave this room for one hour, and will Your Highness, please, give orders that everybody else will leave, too, so that I may remain alone with the young patient?"

The Marques hesitated, evidently being afraid that this ignorant peasant might do his son some harm if left alone with him.

Macario, noting that expression of uneasiness shown by the viceroy, recalled, at this very instant, his first cure of a patient not of his own family, that is, Ramiro's young wife in his native village. Ramiro had hesitated in a similar

way when told to leave the room and let Macario alone with the young woman in bed.

These two cases of hesitation had been the only ones he had ever experienced during his long practice. And Macario wondered whether that might carry some significance in his destiny, that perhaps today, with only two little drops of his medicine left, he beheld the same expression of hesitancy in a person who wanted a great service done but did not trust the man who was the only one who could render that service.

He was now alone with the boy.

And suddenly there appeared his partner, taking his stand at the boy's head.

The two, Macario and the Bone Man, had never again spoken one to the other since they had had a turkey dinner together. Whenever they would meet in a sick room, they would only look at each other, yet not speak.

Macario had never asked of his partner any special favor. Never had he claimed from him any individual whom the Bone Man had decided to take. He even had let go two grandchildren of his without arguing his dinner guest's first claim.

This time everything was different. He would be burned alive at the stake as a witch doctor convicted of having signed a pact with the devil. His children, now

all of them in highly honored positions, would fall into disgrace, because their father had been condemned by the Holy Inquisition to suffer the most infamous death a Christian could die. All his fortune and all his landed property, which he had meant to leave to his children and grandchildren, would be confiscated and given to the church. He did not mind losing his fortune. It had never meant much to him personally anyhow.

What he did mind above all was the happiness of his children. But more still than of his children he was, in this most terrible moment of his whole life, thinking of his beloved wife.

She would go crazy with grief on learning what had happened to him in that strange, vast city so far away from home, and she would be unable to come to his aid or even comfort him during his last hours on earth. It was for her sake, not for his own, that this time he decided to fight it out with the Bone Man.

"Give me that child," he pleaded, "give him to me for old friendship's sake. I've never asked any favor of you, not one little favor for the half turkey you ate with so much gusto when you needed a good dinner more than anything else. You gave me voluntarily what I had not asked you for. Give me that boy, and I'll

pour out the last drop of your medicine and break the bottle, so that not even one little wet spot be left inside to be used for another cure. Please, oh please, give me that boy. It isn't for my sake that I ask you this. It is for my dear, faithful, loyal and beloved wife's. You know, or at least you can imagine, what it means for a Christian family if one of its members is burned at the stake alive and in public. Please, let me have the boy. I shall not take or touch the riches offered me for curing him. You found me a poor man and I was happy then in my own way. I don't mind being poor again, as I used to be. I'm willing to chop wood again for the villagers as I did when we met for the first time. Only, please, I pray, give me that boy."

The Bone Man looked at him with his deep black holes for a long time. If he had a heart he was questioning it at this moment. Now he looked down before him as though he were deliberating this case from every angle to find the most perfect solution. Obviously, his orders were to take the child away. He could not express his thoughts by his eyes or his face, yet his gestures clearly showed his willingness to help a friend in dire need, for by his attitude he tried to explain that, in this particular case, he was powerless to discover a

way out which would meet halfway the problems of both.

Again, for a very long while, his look rested upon the boy as though judging more carefully still Macario's plea against the child's fate, destined before he was born.

And again he looked at Macario as if pitying him and as though he felt deeply distressed.

Presently he shook his head slowly as might someone in great sadness who finds himself utterly helpless in a desperate situation.

He opened his fleshless jaws, and with a voice that sounded like heavy wooden sticks clubbed on a board he said: "I am sorry, compadre, very sorry, but in this case I can do nothing to help you out of that uncomfortable pool you have been put into. All I can say is that in few of my cases I have felt sadder than in this, believe me, compadre. I can't help it, I must take that boy."

"No, you mustn't. You mustn't. Do you hear me, you must not take that child." Macario yelled in great despair. "You must not, you cannot take him. I won't let you."

The Bone Man shook his head again, but said nothing.

And now, with a resolute jerk, Macario grabbed the boy's bed and quickly turned it round so that his partner found himself standing at the boy's feet.

Immediately the Bone Man

vanished from sight for two short seconds and, like a flash, appeared at the boy's head once more.

Quickly Macario again turned the bed so that the Bone Man would stand at the feet, and again the Bone Man disappeared from the child's feet and stood at the boy's head.

Macario, wild with madness, turned the bed round and round as if it were a wheel. Yet, whenever he stopped for taking a breath, he would see his dinner guest standing at the boy's head, and Macario would start his crazy game again by which he thought that he might cheat the claimant out of his chosen subject.

It was too much for the old man, turning that bed round and round without gaining more than two seconds from eternity.

If, so he thought, he could stretch these two seconds into twenty hours only and leave the capital under the viceroy's impression that the boy was cured, he might escape that horrible punishment which he had been condemned to suffer.

He was so tired now that he could not turn the bed once more. Touching, as if by a certain impulse, the little pocket in his trousers, he discovered that the crystal flask with the last two drops of the precious medicine in

it had been smashed during his wild play with the bed.

Fully realizing that loss and its significance, he felt as if he had been drained of the last spark of his life's energy and that his whole life had become empty.

Vaguely, he gazed about the room as though coming out of a trance in which he had been for an uncountable number of years, centuries perhaps. He recognized that his fate was upon him and that it would be useless to fight against it any longer.

So, letting his eyes wander around the whole room, they came to touch the boy's face and he found the boy gone.

As if felled he dropped to the floor, entirely exhausted.

Lying there motionless, he heard his one-time dinner guest speaking to him, softly this time.

He heard him say: "Once more, compadre, I thank you for the half turkey which you so generously gave me and which restored my strength, then waning, for another hundred years of tedious labor. It certainly was exquisite, if you understand that word. But now, coming to where we are at this hour, see, compadre, I have no power to save you from being burned at the stake on the Alameda and in public, because that is beyond my jurisdiction. Yet, I can save you from being burned alive and from being publicly defamed. And this, compadre, I

shall do for old friendship's sake, and because you have always played fair and never tried to cheat me. A royal payment you received and you honored it like a royal payment. You have lived a very great man. Good-bye, compadre."

Macario opened his eyes and, on looking backwards, he saw his one-time dinner guest standing at his head.

Macario's wife, greatly worried over her husband's not coming home, called all the men of the village next morning to help her find Macario, who might be hurt somewhere deep in the woods and unable to return without help.

After several hours of searching, he was discovered at the densest part of the woods in a section far away from the village, so far that nobody would ever dare go there alone.

He was sitting on the ground, his body comfortably snuggled in the hollow of a huge tree trunk, dead, a big beautiful smile all over his face.

Before him on the ground banana leaves were spread out, serving as a table-cloth, and on them were lying the carefully cleaned bones of a half turkey.

Directly opposite, separated by a space of about three feet, there also were, in a like manner, banana leaves spread on which the

- (Continued on page 160)

EDITORIAL

(Continued from page 4)

attention to the world of make-believe than to the larger realities with which he felt more at home. But he would still have wanted to know—typically jumbling together both s-f and fantasy themes and props—exactly *why* people like us willingly sit still for mad scientists, Bug-Eyed-Monsters, ghosts, robots, time travellers, werewolves, and all the rest of it.

For the s-f part of the question, most of us probably wouldn't even hesitate before offering the standard Predictive Defense—that s-f gets us "ready" for the future, maybe not in exact detail but at least enough to help make us psychologically receptive to the accelerating pace of technological change. But what would we say about the fantasy part? For when you come to think of it, exactly why *do* some readers—such as yourselves—like stories about things that never were or ever will be?

Is it that for some the unchanging face of reality begins to wear a little on the nerves, and—like those who occasionally need an ounce or two of alcohol to liven things up a bit—they seek a change in the pages of a fantasy story—the more fantastic, the better? Or do others—

more habitual readers of the genre—need constant waking dreams, more frequent psychic discharges? (The same function, some researchers now believe, performed by nocturnal dreams, which may be helping us to clear away the insignificant recollections of daily experience—that might otherwise clog the spirit or serve as food for neuroses.) Or, finally, could it possibly be that science and its offspring, science fiction, now offer us so complex a view of reality—what with relativity, quantum mechanics, and quasars—that it's too baffling to bear for very long? So some turn for relief to the softer light of fantasy, where—just for fun—the rules that science made are broken one by one.

We certainly don't know the answer to any of these questions, and we suspect that you don't either, but we also think that you're probably not very much bothered by that fact. Maybe that's why so many of you have written to ask that we keep *Fantastic* primarily a fantasy magazine—because you're never really ill at ease with the implications of fantasy and like to take it straight—at least once every two months.

—JR

The TANNER



Illustrated by
Malcolm Smith

If you haven't yet done so, we recommend that you pick up a copy of the 40th Anniversary number of Amazing Stories, our companion magazine, not only because it's crammed with some topnotch s-f stories but because one of them happens to be Wallace West's "The Last Man," surely one of the best Last-Man-in-the-World stories to come out of the field. But aside from s-f, West has also done some memorable fantasy, probably the best of which is "The Tanner of Kiev," a light-hearted mixture of World War II sabotage and peasant folklore, written in the days before the Hot War turned Cold.

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of KIEV *By* WALLACE WEST



. . . And a gnarled oak grows on the shore, and a learned cat that is chained with a chain of gold walks forward and back. And he sings as he goes to the right, and as he goes to the left he tells strange tales of enchantment. And a little hut upon chicken's legs turns round and round and that hut is blind, having neither casement nor door. And here the mortar of Baba Yaga wanders whither it will, and yonder Kostchei, the deathless, gloats above his shining hoards of gold . . . I have been there, and underneath the oak quaffed golden mead. And so I tell them to you. . .

Russian folk tale.

"GOTOV, TOMMY?" yelled the pilot. He waved toward a ribbon of oiled silk which gleamed ever so faintly in the star-shine below.

"Da," Tommy Berennikov shouted back. He squirmed out of the shelter of the cockpit into the roaring wind. With one foot on an ice-coated wing he adjusted the heavy pack so that it would not foul his parachute. Then he lifted a gloved hand in farewell and allowed his body to enter the slip-stream.

The jerk as the gale snatched him, the spinning fall into blackness, affected Tommy as it always did . . . providing an upsurge of emotion like . . . like

the first time he kissed a girl.

He counted slowly, for he enjoyed this uncanny sensation of falling free like a hawk upon its prey. There was plenty of time. They had been flying high to avoid German flak.

"Adeen." It was a tough assignment, this one . . . dropping behind the enemy lines on a moonless night . . .

"Dva." Especially with this cursed radio transmitter strapped to his back. If he missed his footing when he landed he'd be mashed as flat as one of Aunt Sonia's potato pancakes . . .

"Tre." Why couldn't those guerrillas hang onto their stuff?

Always yelling for more equipment . . . more machine guns . . . more rifles . . . more grenades . . . though they knew the regular army was short of them.

"Chetirie." Still and all, the partisans of Kiev were causing the Germans plenty of headaches. What had their last message said? "Four more munition trains blown up!" That had come by courier . . . a seventy-year-old peasant who had wormed his way a hundred miles through enemy lines, forests and swamps. And he had carried under his trembling arm a briefcase jammed with documents captured from a general. Not bad . . . except that he had also asked for a portable transmitter.

"Pyat." Morozko, it's cold up here. Forty below zero, at the very least. Colder than the night he had bailed out near Seville, blown up a bridge and caused a train wreck which killed eight of Generalissimo Franco's pet officials. That was why he had received this assignment. "Eight-at-one-blow-Berennikov." That's what they called him back at headquarters.

"Shest." Better start pulling that rip-cord, Tommy m'boy.

"Sem." Pull that rip-cord, you conceited fool. You'll need plenty of time to get your bearings. Or do you want to land in a tree-top and dangle there till some Heinie shoots you down?

All right. All RIGHT!

He hooked a half-frozen finger through the ring on his left breast pocket and yanked. The chute billowed out above him . . . stopped his meteoric descent with a spine-shattering jerk. The roaring wind trailed off with a wail like a Mushickek. He drifted silently as a ghost in that immensity of blackness. Must be about a thousand feet up. Now to keep watch until the shadow of a tree against the sky warned him that the earth was just beneath. If there were no tree . . . ? But there always had been one! He held his breath and swiveled his head back and forth without result.

Something leaped upward and

struck his feet a blow which made even his teeth ache. He flung himself forward instinctively, at the same time snatching at the shrouds above his head in an effort to spill the air from the chute.

Whether it took a long time or a short time, Tommy never knew, but he recovered consciousness eventually and fell to caressing an egg-like bump on his forehead. His mind was hazy and the frozen ground insisted on dancing a jig under him when he finally managed to stand. Moving like an automaton he searched about until he found a place under the roots of a fallen tree where he could hide the tell-tale red silk of his parachute. Next he unlooped the transmitter from bruised shoulders, slumped down upon it and debated whether he dared light a cigarette. If . . . Finally he shrugged and fumbled for matches. A man was entitled to some consideration after taking a pounding like that. He cupped the tiny flame in his hands and puffed deeply.

"Don't be an oaf, Tommy!" whispered a piping voice at his very elbow. "Germans are not half a *verst* from here."

"Who're you?" gulped the parachutist, grinding out the spark. "And how do you know my name?"

"Heh, heh, heh," giggled the other. "Who hasn't heard of Eight-at-one-blow-Berennikov? As for me, my name is Kostchei. You know me well."

Tommy's dazed mind grappled with that. It reminded him of his grandmother as she hobbled about her hut in that little Ukranian village long ago. Kostchei! His scalp tingled as though the hair he had so carefully shaved from it that morning were trying to stand on end. "Sorry, comrade," he gave it up at last. "Your name means nothing to me."

"No. Perhaps not." The voice held a world of sadness. "They don't teach Russians the ancient things any more. You learn all about tractors and combines and airplanes. But you're not told how to worm secrets out of the Devil or the language of the birds and the beasts. Pfui!" He spat.

"Those things are bourgeoisie superstition," Tommy argued warmly. "We've built a new world. There are no more Tsars, no more dirt, no more misery, no more Bogatirs."

"So you think," piped his invisible acquaintance. "So perhaps it was . . . before the war. Why I've been practically in limbo these twenty years. But not now . . . not around Kiev at any rate. Here the dark old days have crept back over the land like a winter. Kiev even

has a tsar again, although he's called by a foreign name . . . Gauleiter, I think it is. Pestilence stalks. The little dogs are all eaten. And the cats hide deep in the woods to escape a similar fate. No birds sing. And were it not that the Red Army still fights on, all the people would welcome death as their best friend."

"That bad?"

"Aye! And worse. For Gauleiter Schwartz has decreed that every month five hundred of the daughters of Kiev shall be sent to forced labor in Germany. Why the daughters? Because the men of Kiev have long since joined the army or the guerrillas or been killed. As for the girls, their fate makes even me . . . even Kostchei the Deathless . . . long to die at the shame of it."

"Kostchei the Deathless!" Tommy felt his scalp crawl again. He remembered now the *skazki*, or folk tales, which his wrinkled, bright-eyed granny had told him of that Ukranian warlock. But this was all nonsense. His neighbor must be some old man whose mind had been turned by misery. Or was it his own mind that was turned? He shook his head angrily, then desisted when it seemed he felt his brains rattle.

"If you are *that* Kostchei," he said at last, "you can direct me to guerrilla headquarters, can't you?"

"That I can. Ah, the sweet guerrillas. The dear little guerrillas. It makes my old heart glad to watch them stalk the Nazis and slit their throats." Kostchei's laughter shrilled into the rising wind. "True sons of Russia are they. And many is the gold ruble out of my horde that I have given them. And many an enemy have they left where the black iron-beaked crows could pick his bones."

"How do I find them, then?"

"Just follow your nose down the bank of the Dneiper. Jurka, my dog, will walk at your right hand. And Vaska, my cat, at your left. They will take you to the hut of Baba Yaga. Tell her, when you see her, that the clans are gathering. There are four of us here out of the old time, now. We cannot fail. Tell her that and she will direct you on the rest of your journey."

"Thanks, *Dyadya* Kostchei."

There was no answer. Tommy was alone on the frozen field.

Slowly he slipped the loops of the pack transmitter over his shoulders. That bump when he landed must have been a honey to make him have childish visions like that. Now he was right back where he started from. Follow his nose? When he couldn't even see the end of it in this blackness! He stepped gingerly forward. A moment later his feet

found a path which led straight before them. Once he swerved to the right . . . and shivered as he thought he heard a low growl warn him. A long time later he stumbled into a tree. As he groped, some furry creature brushed against his boots. It almost tripped him, but set him back on his way.

Dawn was breaking by the time the wanderer reached his destination. It was a thatched hut set on a wooded knoll overlooking the broad Dneiper. The hovel had but one claim to distinction. Instead of a normal foundation, it stood on two legs which looked strangely like those of some gigantic chicken. These legs moved rhythmically, so that the house turned slowly round and round until one got dizzy just looking at it.

His weird experiences had served to remind Tommy of many of the tales told by his grandmother. So *now* he did the correct thing by chanting: "Stand with thy back to the forest, hut; thy face to me!"

The house became stationary at once. And just inside the open door sat a squirrel solemnly cracking nuts while it sang, in shrill falsetto, a song of old Russia. Instead of eating the kernels, the little animal was piling them carefully on a plate.

"Hello," said the squirrel in a thick Ukrainian accent. "Look-

ing for Baba Yaga? She's out in back repairing her mortar. Had a brush with the ack-ack last night." And it resumed crackling the nuts and paid no further attention to him.

In the wood lot Tommy found the witch. Her nose reached her chin. And her dirty gray hair hung down over her eyes in a straggly fringe as she bent over her mortar. It looked much like a mammoth edition of the utensil used by druggists in mixing their prescriptions, except that it was neatly camouflaged with black and white stripes. The Baba's wrinkled lips were uttering blasphemies as she labored with trowel and plaster to patch a ragged hole in the contraption.

"Good morning to you, Baba Yaga," said Tommy politely. (A witch is not to be addressed lightly, his granny had told him.)

"I smell a Russian smell," she muttered. Then she straightened up painfully, brushed the hair away from her piercing black eyes and grinned at him toothlessly. "Welcome, Tommy Berenikov," she said after taking a long look. "What brings you back and what have you been up to this time? I hope it was something better than killing eight flies at one blow and then bragging about it until you convinced people you were a hero."

"It was eight fascist generals I killed." Tommy flushed.

"Generals, is it now? Well, fascists are no better than flies, except they're a lot harder to get rid of."

"How did *that* happen?" Her visitor changed a painful subject by nodding toward the mortar.

"I was flying over Kiev, scattering leaflets for the guerrillas, when the Huns nailed me with a searchlight. I swept the first beam away with my broom, of course, but just then they tagged me with three more." She struck the defenseless mortar a vicious blow with her trowel.

"Then what happened?"

"I tried to climb, but this son of a *kulak* has a speed of only fifty *versts* an hour and a ceiling not much higher than the roof of my hut. Flak started crumping all around. As you see, one of the shells almost finished me before I could get out of range."

"Maybe you should buy a new model."

"I've put in an order for one, but you know how things are these days. Everything's disorganized. Say!" She hopped up on the rim of the mortar with the agility of a girl and sat there swinging her dirty bare feet. "Maybe you could get Moscow to send me a Stormovik, or one of those American Liberators the radio keeps talking about. If I could fly either of them over

Kiev I'd make things pretty hot for Gauleiter Schwartz and his mob. It wouldn't be leaflets I'd drop then."

"Ummm!" Tommy was non-committal. Then: "Look, Baba Yaga. I'm starved. And I must get this transmitter to guerrilla headquarters. Can you help me? Kostchei said you could. And, oh yes, he said to tell you the clans were gathering and we can't fail."

"Kostchei's an old fool, but I hope he's right this time. As for food, you can have the nuts that Serge's been cracking. That's all we have left to eat hereabouts these days. The Germans have taken everything else. Come on to the house. This repair job can wait. Maybe I can remember a spell that will fix it without having to break my poor old back." She hopped off her perch, led the way to the hut, scooped up the plateful of nuts despite the squirrel's angry chatter, and slapped them on the table before Tommy. After which she flung herself down on the dirt floor and thrust her feet almost into the fire which was blazing in the chimney. In a moment she was snoring.

"Hey," cried Tommy, after he had finished his frugal meal. "How about taking me to the guerrillas?"

One rheumy eye opened at him momentarily. "Serge will take you," muttered the witch

and promptly snored louder than ever.

Picking up the radio, which seemed to grow heavier each time he lifted it, the soldier stepped out of the door. Immediately the hut began revolving on its ungainly legs and all trace of an entrance disappeared in the dizzy whirl.

The squirrel scampered ahead, scolding the slowness of the human as it swung from tree to tree. Soon they left the forest and entered the suburbs of Kiev. Tommy was horrified at the devastation which rose about them. The city was one of the few which had been evacuated so rapidly by the Red Army that there had been no time to destroy it according to the scorched earth policy. However, the Germans had looted the place thoroughly. Hardly a window was intact. Many dwellings had been burned or dynamited as a lesson to inhabitants. And no efforts had been made to keep the streets in repair, collect the garbage or operate the public utilities. It was a haggard ghost of a city out of a nightmare. Ragged citizens wandered through the littered streets. But they seemed in a daze and paid no attention to the stranger and his tiny companion.

Once they ducked into a shell-hole to avoid a goose-stepping enemy patrol. And later a crazed

woman, clutching a dead child to her bosom, begged them for milk. Finally they reached a point where a huge sewer poured its filth into the river.

"In there with you, Tommy Berennikov," squeaked the squirrel. "If the rats don't eat you, you'll find guerrilla headquarters at the other end." And, with a disdainful flirt of his tail, the little fellow departed.

The parachutist plunged into the slimy hole. For a time he was able to walk upright. But the sewer branched and thereafter he had to crawl on hands and knees, fighting off hordes of huge rats the while. After an interminable struggle he struck his bruised head on some sharp obstruction. And once more consciousness departed in a blaze of light.

Tommy came to his senses in a dim cavern which looked like the crypt of some ancient church. By the light of a candle, a slim red-haired girl was bandaging his head.

"Lucky we found you in time," smiled the nurse as his eyes opened. "Those rats would have had you in another five minutes."

"Better they than the two-legged ones up above," he grinned back weakly. "You found the transmitter all right, did you?"

"Yes. The commander will be here in a moment to thank you."

Tommy struggled into a sitting position, to get a better look at her. Nice! he said to himself. Then a door opened and a huge guerrilla, almost as broad as he was tall, entered the room.

"Welcome, Comrade Berennikov," beamed the newcomer through his black spade beard. "I am Commander Kyrilo, at your service."

"Kyrilo?" Tommy seemed dazed. "Not Kyrilo the tanner?"

"I used to be a tanner. Why?" The big fellow looked at him with something akin to anger on his broad, honest face.

"Then I wasn't out of my head," babbled Tommy. "You're the man who harnessed a dragon and ploughed a furrow all the way to the Baltic Sea. And you and Kostchei and Baba Yaga have come back and are working for the freedom of Russia. My name's Thomas Berennikov, so it looks as though I fit into the picture, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," snapped Kyrilo. "Or rather, it seems to me, Comrade Berennikov, that you're laboring under a bourgeois superstition. Some of the poor citizens of Kiev have been telling you stories that you'd best forget. This is no time to put your faith in *skazki* and magic help from some kingdom of thrice-ten. There's a war going on."

"Yes, sir," muttered Tommy,

properly put in his place. He leaned back and let the red-haired nurse finish adjusting the bandage. He noticed there was a smile of secret enjoyment on her snub-nosed face.

The parachutist found, during the next few days, that there *was* a war going on in Kiev; one much different from anything he had experienced during his two years at the front. Here there were no mass attacks across the snow; no daring air raids behind the enemy lines; no pulverizing barrages from Russia's magnificent artillery. This fight was carried on in darkness. It was bloody, cruel and conducted under breathtaking handicaps. A ragged patrol of *stariki*, or harmless-looking old men, would slip out after curfew and bag a German patrol which had gone too far afield in search of food. A woman, walking on tiptoe to avoid exploding a few sticks of homemade dynamite, would succeed in blowing up a truck full of precious gasoline. A girl would worm a bit of information out of an officer she allowed to make love to her. A boy of ten would slip poison into a Hun stew-pot . . .

During those days, Alesha Popovich, the red-haired nurse, acted as Tommy's guide while he familiarized himself with the city. She was a jolly companion who

refused to be awed or frightened by the horrors around them. Formerly she had been an In-tourist guide and knew Kiev like a book. As they worked together Tommy grew more and more fond of Alesha. In fact, he had to stop himself sternly many times when his mind began painting pictures of the two of them spending the rest of their lives together.

"Guerrilla headquarters are located in the crypts and caverns of the ancient Petchersk Lavre monastery," Alesha explained to him at the beginning of one of their trips. "The monastery dates back to the tenth century—you know, Kiev was the first place in Russia where Christianity was preached. These rooms were once the cells where thousands of pale-faced monks prayed and toiled over their illuminated manuscripts during the Middle Ages."

"Haven't the Germans searched the catacomb?"

"Some of it. But it didn't do them any good because they never got back to their superiors to report what they had found. We saw to that."

"But haven't they thrown a cordon about the place, at least?"

"Of course. But the caverns, which honeycomb the entire Petchersk section of Old Kiev, have hundreds of connections with the city sewers. We come and go more or less as we please. At first my stomach used to turn over

every time I went into the sewers, but now I rather like them. They are safe. And sometimes I think that the very sewer rats know we're friends. They seldom bother us. But the Germans fear them like the plague."

"And a plague they'll bring one of these days if the filth and garbage continue to collect," he grunted as they emerged from the caverns at last and gazed upon the desolation which was Kiev. The multitude of golden domes and crosses that give the city its eerie oriental appearance were smoke-blackened and tottering. Fangs of broken glass made windows look like the mouths of dead ogres. One vast pile of buildings in particular seemed as if it had been run through a meat grinder.

"That's the University of St. Vladimir," explained Alesha. "Before the war it had a library of two hundred thousand volumes—one of the finest in all Europe. The Germans used them for fire wood last winter!"

"The devil!" He felt sick.

"The word should be plural." She shrugged strong shoulders under her tattered sheepskin coat. Then, with a grin: "But let me tell you about St. Vladimir. He was also Tsar Vladimir the First, of the province of Kiev back in the old days. When the priests traveled up from Byzantium and told him about Christianity, Vlad-

imir decided that he would embrace the new religion. And he sent a tasseled messenger to the Pope, saying he wanted to be baptized. Well, the Pope probably had never heard of Kiev, so he replied that if Vladimir wished to be a Christian he'd have to come to Byzantium as a simple penitent and beg forgiveness for his sins."

"I'll bet he liked that."

"Did he? He raged and swore, they say, and declared he would not beg for baptism but would take it like a Russian should."

"Then what happened?" asked Tommy as they shrank into a ruined doorway at the sight of an enemy motorcyclist careening down the street.

"Shhh! He's all alone, the fool!" hissed Alesha. As the cyclist drew opposite them, her hand flashed out of her coat pocket and a small round object hurtled into the street. "Duck!" she gasped.

The German and his machine disintegrated as the grenade exploded.

"Now we'll have to run for it. There's a man-hole down the block."

"But you didn't finish telling me about St. Vladimir," said Tommy as they splashed and slithered their way through the sewer toward headquarters.

"Oh, yes." The girl chuckled as though she had already forgotten the man she had killed. "Well,

the Tsar rallied an army of I don't know how many men. And he marched to the very walls of Byzantium. Once there he sent another messenger to Basil, the Emperor of all the Eastern Roman Empire. 'My Lord Tsar of Kiev has heard,' this bearded, leather-clad swordsman told the effeminate emperor on his golden throne, 'that you have a beautiful daughter named Anna. And my Lord Tsar is willing to take her as his wife. Otherwise...' And he shrugged his broad shoulders and looked thoughtfully at the city walls."

"And then what happened?" Tommy kicked at a rat which was attacking his boots, and wondered if he dared slip an arm around Alesha's waist. He decided he didn't.

"Well, what do you expect? First the emperor was going to have the messenger beheaded. And then he decided he'd better take a look at Vladimir's army. And finally he said, sure, the Tsar of Kiev could have not only Anna but five of his other daughters if he'd just go 'way in peace."

"Really and truly?"

"It's in the history books. But that's not all. Basil then had an audience with the Pope and begged him to baptize that awful Russian at once and let him be gone to his forests."

"And did he?"

"What do *you* think? After

that, Vladimir, his bride and his army marched back to Kiev. And upon the day of his arrival he issued an edict that all the people of the province must bring to the imperial palace the stone and wooden idols which they and their forefathers had worshipped since the dawn of time. When the images were collected into a pile a hundred feet high, the Tsar commanded his soldiers to throw them all into the Dnieper. And he also ordered their owners to be thrown after them unless they accepted Christianity. The historians say that nobody got his feet wet that day."

"Alesha," said Tommy suddenly, "I like you. You're...you're cute."

She was not startled. Neither did she laugh at him as he had half expected. Instead, she stopped, ankle-deep in the muck, and lifted her flashlight so that its beam illuminated both their dirty faces. "Go on," she whispered.

"Well, I...I more than like you. I was thinking, while you told that story about St. Vladimir, that it would be wonderful to be near you...to hear your voice...always. We...well, we sort of fit together, I think." He hesitated as he saw a twinkle growing in her black eyes. "Of course, if you don't..."

"Of course I do, silly. I knew the minute I started bandaging your head that day. Only..."

Her mirth bubbled over at last. "Only I was just wondering if ever in this world a girl had been made love to in a sewer." With that she caught his grimy hand in hers, slipped her elbow between his side and his arm and they walked on together, shoulder to shoulder, in the fashion of Russian lovers since time began. Tommy found time to wonder whether Vladimir had walked back to Kiev with his new Tsarina under his arm in this fashion.

After their first clash, the parachutist and Commander Kyrilo got along famously and soon were drawing up plans looking toward the greater confusion of the Axis.

"I tell you, Tommy," Kyrilo boasted once, "we've already got the Boche scared here in Kiev. Parties of less than twenty soldiers don't dare stir abroad at night. Also, we learn and pass the word up to the front lines when reinforcements for the enemy are coming through this territory. Last December we even caught a general and sent him all the way to Stalingrad to be questioned."

"Yes," grinned Tommy. "That was good work, except that by the time he got there the information he brought was out of date."

The ex-tanner scratched his ear. "That was because the enemy had captured our radio transmitter. For the same reason we haven't

yet dared operate the new one you brought."

"What same reason?"

"Well, comrade, the truth of the matter is that here in Kiev the Germans have a master radio sleuth. He can spot a new station within an hour after we set it up. First he jams the transmission... makes *piroshki* out of our signals so that nobody can understand them. And then he locates and raids the set. Four of them we've lost already... along with some of our best men. All of our guerrilla bands have receivers, of course, so that they can keep up with the progress of the war. If I could get instructions to them by air instead of depending on messengers, we'd really make the Germans do a bear dance here. But that black-shirted dog of a Karl Helmut is always on our trail."

"Can't you liquidate him?"

"We've tried again and again, but Gauleiter Schwartz has given him a guard of fifty soldiers. It's impossible."

"Tut," said Tommy. "We don't use that word in Russia any more. Maybe we can discredit this Herr Helmut. I think I have a friend who can solve our problem. Now, what else is bothering you? You know, I have orders to help you any way I can."

"It's the German labor draft that drives me crazy," groaned the guerrilla leader. "Schwartz

has ruled that every month five hundred girls must be turned over to him. He picks names out of the city census records at random. If those whose names are called don't appear, substitutes must be presented. Otherwise he cuts off the city's food supply. We defied him once and Kiev almost starved to death. He's a man of his word. Have you a friend who can solve that problem, too?"

"Maybe." Tommy's grin was cocky, as usual. "Tell you what. I'll crawl down the sewer and see those friends of mine. If I make a deal, will you back me, no matter how mad it sounds?"

"Da," grunted Kyriilo. "I'd make a deal with the devil himself to save those girls."

"You may have to, at that."

That night Tommy lugged the transmitter back through the sewer. Finding Baba Yaga's hut seemed an impossible task, but his luck held. The squirrel was waiting at the bank of the river as though by prearrangement. This fact convinced the soldier that his "bourgeois superstition" had a basis in fact.

"Time you got here," squeaked his guide. "I thought that red-haired female had made you forget your duty. The Baba is waiting. And she doesn't like to. But don't come too near me. You smell like a Hun."

When they reached the hovel, Baba had just finished putting the

final repairs on her mortar.

"Will that crate carry double?" asked Tommy.

"The devil often rides with me," smirked the witch.

"Fine." He swung the radio over the side and climbed in beside it. "I want you to take a run over the Podol section of Kiev. The ceiling's low tonight, so those searchlights shouldn't bother you."

Baba Yaga picked up her broom with one hand, lifted her skirts to her bony knees with the other and hopped in beside him. She muttered and the mortar rose effortlessly. A few more runes, and it was scudding south as noiselessly as a glider. Ten minutes later they caught sight of belching smokestacks underneath which slave labor from all over Europe was toiling to produce war equipment for Hitler. In the midst of the factory district were the vast railroad yards where hundreds of switch engines were puffing and snorting as they made up ammunition and food trains for the front.

Tommy unlimbered the transmitter at this point.

"Calling Gauleiter Schwartz," he chanted. "Calling Gauleiter Schwartz. This is to inform you that the guerrillas of Kiev will tolerate your insolence no longer. Here then is the ultimatum of the guerrillas. You and your *soba-*

kas have just three days to evacuate the city. If you're not gone by that time, you will be liquidated."

He repeated the message over and over until, half an hour later, he could see armored cars converging on the yards from all parts of the city. Karl Helmut's triangulators had done their job.

"They'll search every box car looking for this station," Tommy grinned. "That will block traffic for the rest of the night and give Helmut a big black mark with Herr Schwartz. And if the munitions are delayed we'll have saved a few thousand Russian lives."

"I think I'll give the devil the sack and have you ride with me every night," crooned the witch. Her little eyes were shining.

"Thanks, babe. Now let's hover over the imperial palace a while and give our gauleiter the scare of their life."

Above the gilt-domed monstrosity which was German headquarters he continued his horseplay until once more the radio spotters came streaming from all directions. Just before switching off he purred: "Herr Schwartz: This broadcast was brought to you through the courtesy of the guerrillas of Kiev, from stations located in the railroad yards and in the dungeons of the Imperial Palace."

"Helmut will have some more

explaining to do now," Tommy chuckled "I have a feeling he may face a firing squad in the morning for his failure to catch us."

"Where next?"

"Next take me to Kostchei. And don't spare the magic."

The wizard's cave was exactly as Tommy's grandmother had so often described it. It was set deep between barren hills. And it was appropriately dark, bat-filled and huge. Decorations were provided by dead white stalactites and stalagmites which met like the broken teeth of some eldritch monster.

Baba Yaga guided her mortar skillfully through these dripping obstructions until at last she found Kostchei crouched over a little fire in the farthest recess, playing with Jurka and Vashka.

Kostchei the Deathless faintly resembled a man. That was the only way Berennikov could describe him. He had two legs, two arms and a torso dressed in black kaftan, high boots and a skull cap. As for his face...well, it varied. When the visitors first caught sight of it in the leaping shadows, it looked so old as to be decayed. But when the wizard noticed them, the features seemed to flow together and assume a cherubic smile.

"Welcome, little grandmother. Welcome, O champion who kills eight at one blow," screamed their host in his undisguisable treble.

"You come to ask for help. And you come to the right place."

Then his eyes narrowed and his face underwent another kaleidoscopic change. It became that of a respectable, tight-fisted *kulak* who believed that "that man in the Kremlin" was ruining him. "But don't ask me for gold again," warned this grim visage. "Not another ruble will I give to bribe the Germans. Their cupidity is greater than my poor horde."

"Oh, be yourself," snapped Baba Yaga. She grounded the mortar, hopped out, flopped on the floor and thrust her feet to the edge of the fire.

As an answer to this quip, Kostchei simply disappeared.

"Humph!" sniffed the witch. "I thought so. Just an illusion, aren't you?"

"That's a communist lie!" thundered a reconstituted Kostchei, who towered almost to the roof and seemed about to stamp them into the dirt.

"Stop that foolishness," yelled the Baba. "No red-baiting, either. We've got work to do."

"Yes'm," was the meek answer, and the wizard telescoped into a little man in overalls, with a hammer in one hand and a sickle in the other. "How's this?"

"Ridiculous, as usual, but it will do. And stay that way. I'm getting dizzy."

"Very well, Comrade Yagowitch. "Start the meeting."

"The first point on the agenda," said the witch with a snaggle-toothed grin, "is this: The guerrillas have solved the problem of how to use their radio. We've put it in my mortar and use it while flying over Kiev. In that way it can't be located and we will be able to co-ordinate the activities of various fighting units."

"Don't tell me you thought that one up. Tommy, have a drink of *pevau* out of that bottle to your right. You deserve it. Now, what's the second point... the one that brought you here?"

"Just this," Tommy interrupted. "Friday is the day when another allotment of girls must report for transportation to German labor camps. We want to prevent this, but on the other hand, we can't let the whole city starve. Perhaps you can suggest a way out."

"In the first place," said Kostchei, "Kiev will never actually starve, no matter what the guerrillas do. German production is falling steadily and the Boches are in desperate need of the products of our industries. Reluctant slave labor, such as the Russians have been providing under the lash, is much better for them than no labor at all. In fact, it's quite possible that a real demonstration of strength by the guerrillas right now might bring better conditions for the popula-

tion, rather than worse. The Germans are not the arrogant supermen they were when they first captured Kiev. They're scared of their own shadows now. And they might be frightened into easing things up a bit rather than face widespread revolution."

"Papa Kostchei," grinned Tommy, "you talk like a political commissar."

"Thank you." And promptly the protean wizard assumed the guise of a shaven-pated, khaki-clad commissar, complete with automatic and full cartridge belt.

"I thought I told you to stop that," shrieked the Baba.

"Sorry. I forgot. Now, as for the plans for an uprising. They are very simple, and so obvious that I cry shame on the profession of witchcraft that Baba Yaga has not thought of them. They're really in her province, you see. But since neither of you have the wit to use your own wits, I'll explain. First..." And he went into the details of a plot which soon had Tommy and the witch dancing for joy around the fire.

"A fine wizard is Kostchei," sighed the Baba when she and Berennikov were once more aboard the mortar and flitting bat-like toward the hut. "They don't make them like that nowadays. Only trouble with him is that he has no ambition. Why, with his brains and my feminine

intuition we could rule the world."

"Humph," said Tommy. "You are talking like a fascist now."

For answer she inverted the ship!

Instants later she righted it and scooped up Tommy as he fell headlong through space.

"That will teach you," she grinned at her bruised and gasping passenger, "to insult a first class witch."

"But it's true," he cried, hanging on with both hands. "Only fascists and fools talk of ruling the world."

"You're a brave young man... and a wise one. Let's say no more about it."

Back at the hut, the parachutist installed the transmitter firmly in the mortar. Then he gave the Baba careful directions in its use.

"You're sure you know exactly what to do?" he asked at last.

"My dear!" She threw back her old head proudly. "I will give such a performance that even Hitler will go hide under his bed."

Whereupon Tommy slapped her on her bony back and then, led by the exasperated and sleepy squirrel, wended his way to the sewer.

Kyrilo and the guerrilla command listened to the fantastic plan of Kostchei in silence and growing wonder.

"It will work," the ex-tanner shouted at last, slapping his great hands together until the catacomb resounded. Then turning to a tall, lean individual who was his second in command, he asked: "Don't you think it will work, Lieutenant Muromets?"

"I would say yes, on its merits. But I don't like the superstitious claptrap with which Berennikov has surrounded it."

"Comrade Popovich, what do you say?" asked Kyrilo.

"I vote yes for the women of Kiev," Alesha answered. Then, coming to her sweetheart's rescue, she added: "And if word gets 'round that the Old Ones are helping us defend our *rodina*—our fatherland—so much the better. In these times, even what Lieutenant Muromets called superstitious clap-trap may have its uses."

Kyrilo looked at the other officers in the room for confirmation. Finding it, he began issuing crisp instructions...

Friday morning broke gray, with low-hanging, tearful clouds—just such a morning as Kostchei had promised. At dawn the Petchersk catacombs were humming with activity as five-hundred conscripts-to-be started their preparations. Some two hundred of them really were girls—husky Amazons such as only Russia seems able to produce. They had volunteered

for the dangerous job ahead. And now, as though they had not a care in the world, they were giggling and joking as they rigged up some three hundred even huskier guerrillas in feminine attire. A mountain of skirts and shawls and concealing sheepskin coats had been piled in the center of the floor of one of the largest crypts. And now these were tried on and pinned up on the men until they lost all trace of masculinity.

Tommy was resplendent in gypsy costume, his swarthy, handsome face crowned with heavy braids until he looked as if he had been reading fortunes all his life. Kyrilo was the hardest to disguise, but the task was accomplished somehow with the aid of a blond wig, cushions at appropriate places and unsparing applications of lipstick and rouge. When he saw the finished product Tommy had great difficulty restraining himself from rolling on the floor.

"Kyrilushka," he whooped. "You would make a fit mistress for the gauleiter himself."

The tanner, feeling completely a fool, growled back at him:

"Let's hope this doesn't prove to be a trap, Comrade Berennikov. I've always wanted to die with my boots on, but to die in these skirts would be a bit too much."

When the masquerade was com-

pleted, the "ladies" proceeded to arm themselves. Into their voluminous pockets went amazing numbers of grenades and automatics. And the few tommy-guns remaining to the guerrillas were loaded, and wrapped to resemble parcels of food and clothing.

Alesha, who had been placed in charge of all this, finally surveyed her handiwork with approval.

"We are ready, Commander Kyrilo," she reported briskly. "What are your orders?"

"Leave here by ones and twos at intervals and through separate exits. Assemble at the city hall at noon. Ten or fifteen of you may act as if you knew each other. The rest must appear to be strangers. Cry if you can. If the guards mistreat you, do not resist. You are all helpless youngsters, remember. If the Germans behave as they have done on all previous occasions you will be herded into the courtyard of the Imperial Palace. That's so Schwartz can have the satisfaction of telling you how lucky you are. When he comes out to address you I will wave my babushka. Then let go at the guards with everything you have. The rest of our people will be among the crowds outside the palace. After that we shall see what we shall see."

A tall brunette — femininity unquestionable — elbowed her way forward out of the shadows.

Tommy looked at her goggle-eyed. The newcomer was a raving beauty, even in her old rags. Her stately figure, raven hair and flashing eyes could have graced the court of Ivan the Terrible.

"Comrade Kyrilo," she began. And Tommy drew in his breath sharply; there was no mistaking that highpitched voice. "I am Ludmilla, a sharpshooter from Kharkov. You may have heard of me. I've killed one hundred and eighty-one fascists — although not exactly at one blow. I arrived in Kiev only this morning. Here are my credentials," she added hastily as a group of guerrillas started to close in around her. "I am one of you."

"What do you want, Comrade Ludmilla?" Kyrilo's voice was puzzled.

"I have one favor to ask. I have heard that Gauleiter Schwartz always asks for a spokeswoman to be appointed from among the captives. Let me be that spokeswoman."

"What do you think, Tommy?" whispered the tanner dubiously.

"Let her speak," grinned the parachutist, playing his hunch. "If I'm not mistaken, Ludmilla will have something to say which Schwartz will remember even after he's dead."

At eleven the solemn parade out of the catacombs began. Tommy, Kyrilo and Alesha went

together, the first two tripping over their full skirts and the girl managing hers so gracefully that she became more alluring than ever. Tommy couldn't keep his eyes off her.

They wedged themselves out of the ruined masonry of a bombed building and trudged through the snow-covered, hilly streets toward the appointed place on the square. After a while other groups fell in behind them.

A heavily armed squad of SS men was waiting at the rendezvous. These leering blond brutes noted nothing amiss. Instead they began to jibe at their voluntary prisoners with coarse Aryan humor.

"Yah," sneered one browless wretch who disgraced a lieutenant's uniform. "Here come the cows for milking again." He swung a polished boot at the posterior of one well-padded girl and sent her sprawling on hands and knees in the slush.

A roar of laughter greeted this sally and other troopers seemed about to engage in the horseplay. If this went on their ruse could not fail to be discovered!

"*Halten!*" The command of a lantern-jawed captain quelled the uproar. "Fools. The Gauleiter wants these wenches brought before him in a presentable condition. Later you can have your fun with them."

The captain whipped out a list

and began reading off names. Naturally few of the prisoners were owners of the names called. But Tommy and Alesha had drilled them well. The roll-call was answered until four hundred and fifty "Presents" had been shouted. Then, to make the performance ring true, fifty other girls — authentic ones — explained that they were substitutes — sent to make up the roll when the original draftees were dead, ill, or missing.

Finally the officer grunted, snapped shut his notebook and ordered them to fall in. A band struck up the Horst Wessel song and the pitiful little procession started toward the palace. A lump came into Tommy's throat as he saw that the sidewalks were lined solid with the citizens of Kiev. The onlookers did not weep. They did not speak. They did not move. Each one, from the merest child to the oldest grandmother, stood rigidly at attention, saluting their martyrs.

In silence, except for the hated tooting, the supposedly terrified girls shuffled across the city until they reached the baroque edifice where the gauleiter made his headquarters. It had been a tsar's plaything once. Later it had been turned into a museum, intact with its ikons and ugly gilded furniture. Now it looked slovenly and somehow ashamed of its ultimate degradation.

Through a double line of lip-licking SS men they were herded into the courtyard, a vast area of cobblestones which opened onto the street through an incredible archway. Guards shoved them roughly until they were huddled in the center around an iron grating from which came the reek of a sewer. Facing them was a filigree balcony which some tsar had bought in India and installed as a white anachronism on this gloomy pile. And there, after an interminable, freezing wait, Gauleiter Schwartz appeared to greet them.

The German boss was immaculately uniformed. He carried a swagger stick and his cadaverous face sported a glittering monocle. For a long time he surveyed the prisoners in silence. Finally, satisfied that a sufficient audience had collected outside the archway, he cleared his throat and began in atrocious Russian:

"Heil Hitler. I am glad to learn that on this occasion the labor draft has been filled without disorder. This means that the people of this city have at last realized that it is hopeless to oppose the New Order." His thin lips drew back in what was meant for a smile. "To you women who are going to the Reich I say that you will have plenty of food and the best of treatment. You will work hard for the Fatherland.

And after Germany has won the war you will be allowed to return home to spread the gospel of national socialism among your families and friends. By that time you will have learned the blessings which Der Fuehrer has showered upon Europe."

"Let me shoot the pig now, Kyrilo," whispered Alesha.

Kyrilo shook his be-wigged head and Schwartz continued:

"It has been my custom to allow each group of draftees to select a spokeswoman—someone who can act as a representative of the group until it is disbanded. Is there any among you who will act so?"

There was a stir among the shapeless bundles of femininity in the yard and Ludmilla pushed her way forward. No baggy sheepskin concealed her charms. She was smart in a Cossack hat, leather coat, short skirt and floppy boots. Tommy saw the gauleiter's monocle slip out of his eye. At the unexpected sight of such a magnificent specimen, the German's hands gripped the balcony railing until his knuckles shone white.

The spell was not broken even when the sharpshooter cried in her piercing voice that she had been elected as the spokeswoman.

"Have you any requests to make before you march to the station?" Schwartz was fairly drooling.

"I have, your highness. I believe I can promise you the wholehearted cooperation of all my friends here on one condition."

"What is that condition?"

Ludmilla hung her handsome head and actually blushed.

"I'd rather we spoke of it in private, your highness," she simpered, clasping her hands and swinging them in front of her.

"Well, in that case, perhaps you'd better come up here."

"What the devil?" growled Kyrilo, as the woman started mounting the broad outside staircase which led to the balcony. "She's going to betray us."

"I don't think so," Tommy whispered. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. We're ready." Then his jaw fell. "Look!"

As Ludmilla ran up the steps she began to change in a horrible fashion. First, her face lost its haunting beauty and turned into a slaving muzzle. Then her head sank between her shoulders. And finally her clothing vanished and grey fur began to sprout on a body which was also developing a long, lean tail with every jump.

A wild shout went up from the prisoners and the peering crowd behind them. But Schwartz and his SS bodyguard stood paralyzed.

Before a shot could be fired, the creature had reached the balcony. Straight at the gauleiter's throat it leaped, squeaking like a violin gone mad. The German

dropped his swagger stick and threw up his arms against the onslaught. The shock of the attack whirled him against the balcony railing. He screamed and struck out wildly. Then he tottered over the edge and plunged into the courtyard. When he hit the cobbles, the slaving thing was still on his chest, slashing at his throat.

Tommy could see it clearly now — a gigantic gray rat with evil red eyes and fangs like razors. Schwartz lay where he had fallen. And the rat fed contentedly until a burst of pistol fire showed that the bodyguard had partially recovered from the shock. The monster, at this, flung up its muzzle and set up a defiant squealing loud as that of a pig caught under a gate. Then a second miracle happened. Out of the sewer grating in the center of the yard came pouring a horde of other rats. They were normal in size, but equally gray, filthy and vicious. They came by thousands, belching out like a fountain seen in a nightmare.

And with one accord they hurled themselves upon the milling soldiers and SS men, leaping at throats and hands; swarming up boots and trouser legs. Pandemonium reigned as the Fritzes kicked and yelled in terror while trying to reach the stairs or the street.

At that moment Kyrilo waved his almost-forgotten babushka and the prisoners began hurling their grenades and unlimbering their tommy-guns. Struck by several bombs, the flimsy white balcony and its human and animal freight collapsed into the yard. And Tommy knew, without question, that the palace had been won.

But other troops, attracted by the uproar, came running from both ends of the street. This was the cue for the citizens of Kiev, who up to this point had been watching spellbound.

Snatching up discarded German rifles and uprooting paving stones, they turned upon their astonished conquerors and drove them hence, howling.

Shooting now became general all over the district. And by this Tommy knew that other guerrilla bands and Boche patrols had joined in the fray. Next, the air raid sirens began screaming as a signal for emergency mobilization. Hell was breaking loose in Kiev and it might be hours, if not days, before the Germans would be able to restore any kind of order.

But this preliminary victory was too good to last. Tommy knew it as soon as he heard the rattle of heavy machine gun fire start far down the street. Soon a platoon of mechanized troops headed by light tanks, swept toward

them through the fog and snow which had begun to fall again. Their guns mowed great swaths through the unarmed citizenry and soon these were fleeing in all directions. But the prisoners and the guerrilla groups which had joined them closed ranks and held their ground before the palace, firing from behind doors and windows and hastily improvised barricades.

In the midst of the hand-to-hand combat Tommy caught sight of a huge warrior, clad in the chain mail of ancient days and swinging a double-edged sword.

"Well done, Kostchei," he shouted as he picked off a Boche who was heaving hand grenades from the roof of the palace.

"Poetic justice," the wizard grinned back, wiping his blood-smeared face. "Rats to the rats!" He punctuated the remark by slicing an enemy almost in two before he disappeared into the thick of the fighting.

By this time the defenders were vastly outnumbered and it seemed only a matter of time before they must be overpowered. Tommy, however, refused to concede defeat. He had planned this battle along the lines of those of the legendary Berennikov: Imitate the enemy's strategy but go him one better and you can't fail!

Nevertheless, he couldn't keep from glancing anxiously at the

sky as the enemy horde closed in for the kill. Could it be possible that Baba Yaga had failed to carry out her assignment?

At last he heard what he had been waiting for—the low, far-away thunder of airplanes. The witch had got through — had taken her mortar and the transmitter outside the range of fascist jamming and had radioed to Moscow for help. Now the Red Air Fleet was on its way.

Soon wave after wave of crimson-starred bombers and fighters loomed out of the mist — flying so low they barely skimmed the rooftops. No anti-aircraft fire greeted them. In the confusion they had not been spotted until they were right on top of the city.

The bombers wheeled and headed straight for the railroad yards and the munition dumps whose positions had been given them by the Baba. The fighters swooped down upon the palace, and before their deadly strafing the Germans melted away like chaff.

Regardless of danger, Tommy, Kyrilo and Alesha climbed to the roof of the palace to watch the debacle. The bombers — how many hundreds of them they could only guess, were already dropping their cargoes with the precision of long practice. Before their eyes the railroad yards burst apart and blazed to the heavens. Next the three great munition dumps exploded, one after an-

other, with roars that knocked the onlookers to the roof and smashed all of the remaining windows in Kiev. And finally they heard a distant screaming as the fighters circled distant troop cantonments and butchered the milling soldiers they found there. After that the fleet re-assembled, circled high over the palace as though saluting the guerrillas, and headed back toward the northwest. The whole attack had not taken fifteen minutes.

That evening, Tommy and Alesha sat close together in the same crypt where they had first met. Before them Kyrilo paced back and forth as he discussed the battle.

"It was really just a skirmish," shrugged the commander at last. "Tonight the city is ours, but tomorrow the Germans will recover from their funk and start hunting us down like wild beasts. So it will go until the Red Army breaks through to us." He scratched his ear thoughtfully. "When that day comes, we guerrillas will still be here—the unyielding anvil upon which our soldier comrades can beat the fascist dogs to bits. And when Kiev is firmly in our hands once more, it spells the end for Hitler."

Looking at the heroic tanner, huge in his leather coat belted with cartridges, Tommy seemed to be hearing once more the

soft voice of his grandmother telling one of her endless stories: "And at last Kyrilo utterly defeated the dragon who devoured the daughters of Kiev. And he harnessed the monster to a plough of metal so heavy that a hundred oxen could not move it. And the dragon drew the plough from Kiev to the sea and made a furrow twenty fathoms deep. And Kyrilo drove the dragon into the blue sea, and the waters covered him and the plough drew him down through the depths to the nethermost cave of the ocean, and there he lies even now and the plough of Kyrilo the Tanner lies on his back."

"Stay with us, Tommy, until that day comes," Kyrilo was saying when the parachutist recovered from his reverie.

"Yes, stay with us," whispered Alesha, her strong, dirty little hand pressing tightly that of her lover. But what she meant was: "Stay with me."

Tommy shook his head as though to clear away temptation and rose to his feet.

"No." He tried to hold his voice steady. "My work is done here. You have your radio and a method of using it. Now my orders are to report back to Moscow. I must start at once—tonight."

But looking into Alesha's stricken eyes he was recalling the end of those *skazki* about another Tommy who had killed eight at

one blow: "And so," it went, "because of his boasting and his conceit, and also because the earth could not spare such a hero just at that time when the Mongols were sweeping down upon Mother Russia from the East, Berennikov was shut out from Paradise, and he must need return again to earth, and live, and live . . . and live."

He made the farewell as painless as possible by swearing to come back to Kiev with the Red Army, if not before. Then he kissed Alesha as much as was good for either of them, shouldered a knapsack, took one last look at his automatic and its precious ammunition, and softly opened and closed the little trap-door leading into the sewer.

As he sloshed through the fetid darkness he decided to ask Baba Yaga for a lift back to Moscow in her mortar. But when he came to the river, no squirrel awaited him. Instead there was a bit of white cloth, wrapped around a handful of freshly cracked nut meats.

"An omen," he grinned wryly. "Those who turn their backs on Kiev turn their backs also on the Old Ones." Nevertheless, as he started searching along the bank for some sort of boat on which to cross the river, he resolved that, if it was humanly possible, Baba Yaga should have her Storm-ovik.

He found the boat at last, a rotten thing which spilled water at every plank. But somehow he crossed the stream and stood for a long time looking toward the blur of darkness that was the Mother of Cities.

In the end, he started off across the snow-covered hills toward far away Moscow. For a time he walked in silence. Then, like a good Russian, he began to sing. It was Alexander Blok's "The

Song of the Twelve." And Kostchei, if he was nearby, must have smiled proudly at the words:

*"On, with rifles lifted
At the hidden enemy.
Through deaf alleys where the
snow is sifted;
Where the lonely tempest tosses
free.
Onward, where the snow is
drifted
Clutching at the marcher's
knee."*

The End

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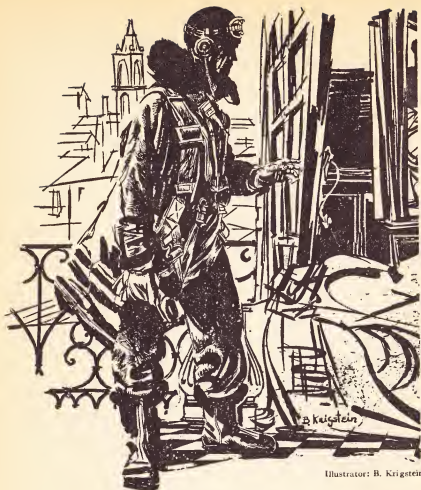
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Illustrator: B. Krigein

WOLF PACK

By WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

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Although all the mail isn't in yet—as this is being written—apparently the most popular story in the January Fantastic was Walter Miller's "Six and Ten Are Johnny," that unforgettable chiller about the alien jungle trying to get to Earth. Now, in an entirely different vein—but with the same beautiful feel for narrative—we offer you "Wolf Pack," another superb story by the Hugo-winning author of A Canticle for Leibowitz. This time it's World War Two—and Lieutenant Mark Kessel (U.S. Air Force), on his forty-sixth mission over Italy, and La—dark, intense, passionate La, the girl of his haunted dreams—who made it his last!

HE GASPED and sat up, spilling blankets from sleep-hot shoulders. He shivered a moment in darkness, shaking his head in his hands. Bixby snored faintly on the other cot. Engines were coughing to life on the flight-line as the ground crews pre-flighted the waiting ships. The breath of morning came icy through the

tent-flaps to shock him into full wakefulness.

He glanced at the luminous flare of his watch dial. It was nearly killing time.

He swung his legs out of bed, felt the gritty earth under his bare feet, groped under the cot for fleece-lined boots. He lit a cigaret, then a candle, stared at Bixby for

a moment. Bixby's mouth was working and a sliver of drool lay over his chin.

Mark Kessel hauled his lanky frame to its feet, and stepped over to Bixby's bunk. He lifted one end of the cot two feet from the floor and dropped it hard. Then he went outside to finish dressing in the olive grove while Bixby spluttered and fought the bed clothes.

Dew was in the olive trees, and it glistened faintly in the dim light from other tents in the grove where men grumbled before the dawn and crawled into coveralls and flight jackets, stuffed candy bars and bail-out kits in their knee-pockets, buckled low-slung forty-fives about their waists, tucked a scented letter inside their shirts, and stalked away with a lazy slouch to fly and kill in the dawn.

"I've got a feeling," came Bixby's muffled voice from the tent.

"Yeah?" Mark grunted, not wanting to talk. He dumped frigid water from a jerry-can into a steel helmet and began sloshing his face and head.

"This one'll be a bitch," said Bixby.

"Maybe."

"This your forty-sixth, Mark, or seventh?"

Mark Kessel glowered for a moment into darkness. "Dry up, will you Bix? I don't feel like gab."

"Hung over?"

"Uh-uh."

"Dreams again, huh? About the dame."

"Just dry up."

"Okay, Skipper. Sorry."

A stupid mistake, he decided, telling Bix about the dreams and about La. A drunkenly stupid mistake. Bix made noises like a green flight surgeon with delusions of psychiatry, and, having memorized the symptoms of flight fatigue, was always ready to gig a fellow fly-boy with a diagnosis, prognosis, or post mortem. And he couldn't understand about La.

An orderly room corporal came prowling through the grove, splashing a flashlight's beam among the trees and bellowing. "All bombardier-navigators, report immediately to briefing. All bombigators, early briefing."

A tent flap parted, revealing a slit of light with a head in it. "Hey, Corp!" It called. "What's the target?"

"Not sure, Lieutenant. Heard it's Perugia."

Listening, Mark Kessel froze, his face dripping into a towel.

"Hell, we just hit Prujie last week," growled the head.

"Zat so?" answered the corporal indifferently. "All bombigators, report immediately to briefing! All bombigators . . ." The corporal wandered on.

Mark stood rocking slightly, towel halfway to his face, remem-

bering Perugia. He heard Bix coming outside, and began drying himself.

"He say Perugia?" Bix grunted.

"Yeah."

"Told you this one'll be a bitch."

"Yeah."

"Well, Pappy, he was yelling at me. See you later."

"Yeah. Take it easy."

Bix shuffled away toward the orderly room, unzipped boots making cocky flapping sounds about his ankles. Mark sighed and went back into the tent to stretch out on his cot and think. A preliminary bombardier's briefing meant that he had a half hour or so before pilots and enlisted crews were called. The group had done a lousy job on Perugia last week, and the colonel probably meant to rumble about it to the men who manned the bomb sights. It was decreed that the city should die.

Mark lay blowing slow smoke at the candle-flame and wondered what the hell had happened to him in eight months of war. Once he was sick when he saw the long hungry strip of bomb-bursts trace a belt of billowing death across a small Italian village. Once he howled in the cockpit when a flitting Focke-Wulf slashed in-and-down from five o'clock high, leaving the plexiglass turret of his wing-ship coated crimson from inside. The turret was partially shattered, and the slipstream dried

the crimson to ugly brown and flaked it away before wheels touched home ground.

Now he felt nothing. I am a machine, he thought. Or a part of a machine. A machine with five human parts geared in with the aluminum, glass, and steel. They screw us into our places and we function like pistons, or cogs, or vacuum tubes. We, who were five, become one, and that beats hell out of the Trinity.

Listen, Kessel, he told himself, you're getting to be a sad sack of cemented *merde*. You got four missions to go and they send you home. Why bitch about it now?

But he closed his eyes and watched a mental bomb-pattern trace a mental stripe of hell across a small mental village, and it all looked quietly familiar and unfrightening to him. He dived down through billowing dust to peer at crushed things lying in the rubble, and still he felt nothing.

Mark Kessel stubbed out his cigaret in the dirt floor of the tent and asked himself almost indifferently what had happened to his soul? Or whatever it was.

He stared at the candlelight flickering on the canvas canopy above him and struggled to feel something besides emptiness.

He thought of La. She brought a faint tickling to his scalp and a pleasant pulsing of the temples. For a long time he lay basking in

the warmth of La. She was sleeping. She lay curled in a feather-bed, dark hair tangled across an oversized pillow, lips parted, an arm under her head. He scented the faint musky warmth about her, watched her lazy breathing, noted the paleness of a shaven armpit. She stirred in her sleep and smiled faintly. She was dreaming of him. He slipped quietly into her dream, and they wandered along a sunny lake shore, watching the ducks skimming low over water that scintillated in the breeze.

"Will they read the banns tomorrow?" she whispered.

"Tomorrow at every Mass."

Mark shook his head and sat up. There was paper in his val-pack at the end of the cot. He dragged it out and lay on his side to write with the stationery box on the edge of the cot. He usually wrote her a letter before a mission, if there were time enough.

He told her about his crew, and about Lecce and San Pancrazio and the way the old Italian women came to catch lizards and snails in the vineyard and cooked them over charcoal fires along rubbled streets in the village. He told her about the olive grove and the vineyards and the donkey carts painted in carnival colors, and about how he had tasted a donkey steak in a San Pancrazio cafe. He told her about the little girl with the festering shrapnel wound, and

the bullet-pocked walls of once-fascist buildings whose megalomaniac inscriptions in praise of *Italia* and *Giovannezza* had been daubed over with red paint and obscenity. And . . .

Listen, Babe, this one's got me down. I haven't talked about such stuff before, but this time's different. I'm scared as hell. This mission gives me the shakes. Maybe it's only because I'm nearly finished with my tour. Maybe it's because I'm about ready to go back. But it's more like being scared for you, baby, not for myself. I felt like this the last time we hit this target.

The words surprised him. He had felt no conscious fear, but as words poured forth, he knew that fear was there.

I love you, La.

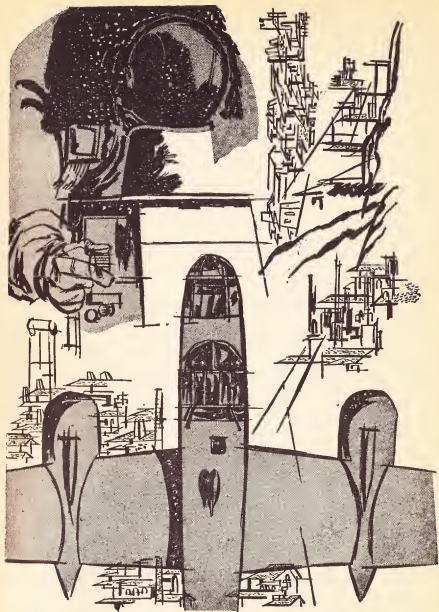
He stared at the letter for a time, then held it toward the candle-flame, watched soot collect on its underside, watched a charred spot appear, crack, and catch fire.

The last ashes were fluttering to the floor when the tent-flaps slapped apart and a bulldog face thrust itself inside.

"Whattthehell, Kessel, you think we oughta hold the goddam war up for you? Get your lazy butt out to the truck!"

"Sorry, Major. I didn't hear the call."

Major Gladin's hammy face put on a fanged smirk. "Well you got my personal invitation now, Lieutenant. Shall I send a staff car for



you, Lieutenant, or can you walk."

Kessel reddened and rolled off the bunk. Major Gladin stalked away, mumbling about the "fifty-mission heebies" and temperamental goddam airplane jockeys who needed wet nurses.

He scraped the ashes of the letter into the dirt with his foot. Maybe you'll know I wrote it anyhow, Babe. Maybe you'll get it somehow, even if I don't know just where to mail it.

A brisk dawn wind had risen, and clouds gathered in a gory dawn. A pair of Limey trucks hauled the flight-crews of the 489th Squadron from the tent area along the winding bumpy road to the old barracks that served as a briefing room. Narrowed eyes watered in the wind, and men sandwiched their chapped faces between the fleece-skin lapels of their jackets. Men huddled behind the cabs of the trucks, trading occasional insults, or smoking in silence while hair whipped about their eyes and foreheads.

Mark Kessel listened to the briefing officer with half an ear. Much was routine, and much was of interest chiefly to the squadron leaders and lead-bombardiers. Wing-men hugged the formation and followed the lead ship. Wing bombardiers toggled off the five hundred pounders upon signal from the goose at the head of the vee. He listened with interest to

weather data, flak and fighter reports, and information on the target.

Perugia was a bulge in an artery that fed the *Wehrmacht* fist. They wanted the arteries burst and bled. They wanted a tourniquet around Italy, a tourniquet to numb the South and enfeeble it. They wanted an amputation.

"The marshalling yards are the principal target," the colonel called curtly, "but stretch the pattern over the town. Give Jerry something to do, shovelling rubble. Any questions?"

You take five hundred pounds of TNT, thought Kessel, and you dump it on a plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal footwarmers and coral virgins looking down from wall niches, a house with photographs of Babe Ruth and Primo Carnera flanking an eighteenth century crucifix, a house that had seen ten generations of human birth and growth and love and death, a house with antipasto furnishings and oil-and-vinegar atmosphere and girl-at-the-piano warmth about the living room. A house rich with the odor of blood-red wine and moon-pale cheese, with the savor of garlic and anisette, with the aroma of healthy perspiring women, and on Holy Days, the smell of candleflames, mingled with baking cakes. You bombed it, you clobbered it, you reduced it, you shattered and

wrecked and crumbled it into a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth caught between the stones fluttered in a dusty breeze. You took the house and kicked it apart into the street so that Jerry would have to spend his time and his bulldozers clearing it out of the way. You never see the house, or the dozens of others like it. You only know it's there somewhere in the ugly belt of dust and belching hell ten thousand feet beneath you, but not seeing it, you feel only a puzzled concern.

There were no questions.

Men in fleece-skins and parachute harnesses slouched out of the briefing room and milled toward the squadron trucks. There was no laughter. Quietly, around the corner of the building, a gunner knelt for a chaplain's blessing, and quickly strode away. Trucks grumbled away, nosed onto a taxi-strip, headed for the aircraft dispersal area.

Mark Kessel stared at the eagles crouched in the olive grove and thought about La. The eagles' wing racks were loaded with bombs and their bellies were full of thunder. La was combing her hair and smiling softly at her thoughts. She was thinking of a dream. She crossed her legs, and the satin robe fell from her thighs as she sat before the vanity. Brown and slender, and a muscle twitched as she absently swung a

foot and laughed softly to herself.

He caught her shoulders gently, and she came up to him with a low purr of pleasure. Her bosom snuggled close and her shoulders hunched forward against him.

"O Marco! Che bello questo momento!" she murmured.

Mark chuckled at his own inventions. He had not seen an English-speaking woman in so long that even the image of La spoke Italian.

The dun-colored eagles looked hungry on their concrete emplacements. There is something anxious and eager in the three-legged stance of a B-25, with its blunt and squarish features and the gull-like set of its wings. They're more alive than most aircraft, he thought, and full of a childlike enthusiasm. They performed their tasks with innocence.

There were certain advantages to being a machine, he thought. Certain comforts in mindlessness and guiltlessness. The light of dawn was red on their wings and flaring on their plexiglass blisters.

"Hell, Kessel!" barked a voice. "Wake up! Shake it, will ya?"

He came out of a daze, glanced around, saw the rest of his crew already out of the parked truck and walking toward the ship. Bixby grinned back at him over his shoulder.

"Come on Pappy! We need a driver."

He growled something sour at the men remaining in the truck, vaulted over the tail-gate, and sauntered after his crew. The truck lumbered on, delivering parcels of men at each parking station. He checked over the crew chief's report, signed the slip, listened to the crew chief's usual straight faced remark:

"Perugia, huh? Milk-run again, eh, Pappy?"

"Sure. Care to come along for the ride?"

"Guess not. Think I'll go to town for a little excitement."

"Take off."

They parted still wearing straight faces.

The turret gunner and the radio op were already crawling into the rear hatch. Mark turned for a moment to glance over the ship with its "Prince Albert" sign on the nose. It had acquired its name when a North African ground crew had used a tobacco can to patch a bullet hole in the fuselage. The ship was scarred and decrepit, but he knew every inch of it, and he suspected that it would fall to pieces in other hands than the knowing ones of its present ground and flight crews. He loved the old rattling wreck. Almost the way he loved La.

"Damn it to hell, Pappy!" called Surges, his copilot. "Do we fly today, or don't we?"

"Keep your war-drawers on, Junior Birdman. Pappy's comin'."

He hiked toward the forward hatch, and moments later inverters whined in the cockpit. Engines coughed to life.

"Interphone check. Bixby?"

"Loud and clear, Pappy," answered the voice in his headsets.

"Radio?"

"Burnes, loud and clear."

"Turret?"

"Sparlev, ditto, Pappy."

"Tail?"

"Winters, okay, sir."

"The class is now in session. Be seated, gentlemen."

Preliminary patter brought a sense of oneness somehow, like a man prodding himself to make sure he was still in one piece. Mark lost his black mood as he taxied the Prince from the revetment and into line on the strip. There was thunder of engines in the morning, and the trees whipped in the prop-wash at every turning. The eagles lumbered single-file to the end of the runway. The eagles took off in pairs, wheels folding gracefully, almost daintily, as they roared aloft and circled for assembly in the sky. Twenty-seven ships gleamed golden in the early sun. A flying wolf pack that rallied by twos and formed in flights of three, three flights in echelon, three squadrons in a staggered vee.

The wolf pack turned east toward the open sea, and the Adriatic fluttered with blinding gold

in the direction of a blazing sun.

Mark Kessel felt Surges watching him occasionally, gave him a questioning glance. Surges was a dark little man with a sour smirk and a quick nervousness that made Mark wonder sometimes why they'd packed him in a twenty-five instead of a Mustang or a Thunderbolt.

"Feeling better, Pappy?" Surges asked over the interphone.

"Better than what?" grunted the pilot.

"Don't hand me that horse-manure, Skipper. I can read you like a tech order."

"Then read and shut up. There's a war on, you know."

"And if I may echo the immortal words of Sherman, war is a crock of crap."

The formation thundered northwestward along the broad blue tongue of the Adriatic. Kessel's crew fell silent, each of them aware of the other's presence and functions, each filling his place in the total Mechanthrope. War, thought Mark, was paradoxical proof that men by nature are co-operative social beings, functioning best as teams. Unfortunately, teams were not necessarily co-operative with other teams.

Hearken to the wisdom of a washed out flak dodger, he mused sourly. Once, when he was a sophomore math and philosophy student, he could tolerate his own solemn intellectualizings. Now,

when they happened accidentally, he felt the need to boil himself in sarcasm and forget it. Nothing seemed sillier than searching for subtle meanings when the only meaning left in life was how to stay alive. He needed no rationalizations about his reasons for being where he was and what he was. Idealism was for the crumbs who never got there. He liked to fly, and he liked to play the game, and if the rules were dirty, then it would be more embarrassing to refuse to fight than it was to play the rotten game. People were proud of him for playing it, and he was glad they were proud, for no reason other than that it felt good.

He grinned acidly at Surges. "Hey, Surgie. I just realized that we are the 'Mothers'-Sons-Who-Fought-and-Bled' that they talk about on the Fourth."

"Jeez, whattay know!" Surges mused for a moment. "Say, you thinking about doing another tour?"

Mark spat an obscenity.

"I know," said Surges. "You're feeling guilty about not bleeding."

"True, possibly true."

"A small scar would probably help."

"Help what?"

"Life, liberty, and the pursuit of women. You could always show her your scar as a way of breaking the ice."

"Not necessary. No ice . . ."

Around La, he finished under his breath, and fell silent again. Gloomily silent. Maybe I'm really getting psycho, he considered, realizing how much he believed in La. How could he explain about La to somebody like Bixby or Surges? *There was this dame, see, and her name was Ruth, and she came from Seattle, and she was blonde, pale-eyed, and creamy, see? And she's waiting for me, but it's no damn good any more, because I can't see her. I see only La, and La is a ghost, a figment, a myth made by a haunted spirit.*

She had grown like a strange moth in the chrysalis of his mind, born of a slow metamorphosis that began with a memory image of Ruth. The metamorphosis had changed a pleasant, comfortable, homey sort of a girl into a sleek, intense, moody creature of tender passion, whom he called "La" or "La Femme" because he knew she was no longer Ruth. But who was this wraith who came to him across the frozen tundra of his psyche?

Don't kid yourself, fly-boy, it's happened to other guys. Idealization, they call it. You revise Ruth because you're not quite satisfied with the way she is. You substitute the thing you want for the thing that's true, and if you didn't have a pocketful of pictures for reference, you'd think your La

was Ruth, you stupid ape. Guys have thought it before, and it's a helluva shock, they say, to bump buck teeth with the girl you remembered as a delectable siren instead of a toothy frump. La is an idealized Ruth, and a part of you damn well knows it.

But he couldn't sell himself. It hurt. There was a La somewhere, and he had to believe in her. He groped for ways to support the belief: telepathy — or a chance meeting that lingered in unconscious memory without details of time and place. She came to him in dreams with such clarity that he was frequently certain that somewhere he had seen her. Perhaps one of those brief meetings at some moronic party where two people meet and chat and sense some strong attraction between them, but never manage to get beyond the usual polite inanities because of surging friends with cocktail glasses and the restrained sub-note of hysteria that pervades a roomful of yammering humanity which is having a lousy time but pretending to enjoy itself. So maybe he met La that way, and she haunted him.

She was a physical touch in the night, a whispered voice in lonely moments. He knew her moods, her weaknesses, her strengths. They fitted his own, and the two halves dovetailed into one flesh, one spirit. There was a lock, and a key to fit it — a sword, and a

sheath to match. There were two clocks, running back to back, keeping the same time by heart-beat pendulums. But she was lonesome and frightened, and he knew not why.

The fighters came sidling in out of the hot blue sky, friendly killers that met the wolf pack off the coast near Bari to escort it northward for the strike. A Lockheed Lightning slipped in close to Kessel's flight, throttled back, waggled its wings. Kessel exchanged a thumbs-up with the fighter jockey, then watched the haughty killer flip away and climb to fly far out at nine-o'clock-high, guarding the pack against steel-beaked falcons of the Luftwaffe.

The sun poured into the cockpit and warmed it. The sun washed the coastline far off to the left below. The sun baked the dun-colored ships and made the formation a thing of beauty against the Mediterranean blue. Sky and sea were full of turquoise peace that made the waiting violence seem unreal, a battle-game played under the auspices of a jovial Wotan who saw that killing was not for keeps.

Kessel gave the controls to Surges while he lit a cigaret and settled back to relax for awhile. He stared down at the lace-fringed sea where triremes had sailed and Caesar's ships had sped toward other wars. It was the

same. Add wings and replace the slaves with 1750 horsepower radial engines, and the catapults with demolition bombs. It was always the same. It was destructive, but because it was patterned and planned, because it was systematized and rhythmic, because it was dynamic and flowing toward a goal, it was somehow creative through its functioning. Through crucifixion came redemption; through war, new pattern and synthesis.

"*Pilot to crew,*" he called over the interphone. "*We're coming onto posted property. Better test your guns.*"

La would not like what he was feeling now, he thought. She hated the whole bloody mess, and would be unable to understand his own mixed feelings and ambivalences. Look through my eyes, my La. See what I am seeing and feel my feelings while I am a part of this Mechanthrope. For here we fail to fit, and though here be difference between us, so must there be understanding. Look with my eyes! See the sleek wolf pack running across cold sky, feel the icy air that leaks in around my feet, and the warm sun on the slippery leather of my jacket. Look north to the clear horizon where death will soon meet death and a city shall be consumed. Know that we in the pack must move and live as brothers, even though we must kill our brothers down below, whom

we will never see — never know.

Do you feel me, La? For I know that you are sitting on a stone bench beneath a trellis with a book in your lap, gazing dreamily out toward the lake where we walk in the breeze by night. A small child plays at your feet, and he is your cousin.

But it was no good. He could never seem to drag her to him while he flew. It was as if she resisted knowing what he was and what he did.

The ship's guns burped above the thunder of the engines as Burnes, Bixby, Sparley, and Winters each rattled off a few rounds from the fifty calibre guns in their respective positions. Mark nosed the ship down slightly and squeezed the firing stud for the fixed nose-guns. A belch shuddered up through the cockpit, and a momentary haze flickered up across the plexiglass, and four streaks of tracers squirted out ahead to vanish toward the ocean. Other ships were doing the same. A flexing of the muscles before the brawl.

If only the target were not Perugia! Perhaps it was the length of the mission and the time over enemy territory that made him uneasy, but Sofia and Ploeste were even farther and they gave him no such discomfort. He had a quick knotting of his belly with the bombing of Perugia, and there was no logic in it. Maybe it was

something about the countryside that stirred some old memory of home, but it was as if the reproving eyes of monks and urchins and old women were upon him, as if hatred were a palpable thing, radiating up from the land below. As if the Christ that was suffused in the flesh of Italian masses called softly in rebuke to the wolf pack.

O my people, what have I done to thee?

In what have I grieved thee?

Answer me,

*For I gave thee a royal sceptre,
And thou hast given to me a scourge.*

"Hey, Pappy, this is Bix," croaked his headsets.

"Yeah?"

"Look at the coastline — up about eleven o'clock low. See those specks?"

Mark leaned close to the window and stared down for a few seconds. Three gnats were flitting out across the water, close to the drink. "Fighters," he answered absently.

"Maybe our own, boss."

"Maybe. . . . Pilot to crew, you get that?"

They answered in turn that they got it.

"Burnes, you keep your eyes on them. The rest of you keep looking around."

He switched his jackbox to command radio and called the escort craft. "Hello Jackknife,

this is Eggbeater. Sharks at curfew time below. Over."

"Roger, Eggbeater. Out," came the reply.

But the fighters remained close to the formation, except for two that broke away and began climbing instead of diving. Mark watched them for a moment, then called the crew again.

• "Everybody but Burnes — keep an eye out above. Those may be decoys down below. Don't get caught with your pants down if a bunch of pigeons come out of the sun."

"Say, Pappy," Burnes called five minutes later. "I think those are P-47s. They're heading on south."

"Roger, but watch it. Jerry knows we're coming."

The wolf pack came to Fermo and turned inland, feinting toward Terni. Over the coast, hell broke. The first black blossom of flak opened suddenly inside the formation, blotting Mark's view of the 487th Squadron for an instant, then dropping behind. The wolf pack spread quickly apart, the ships weaving and swaying evasively while they kept the general shape of the formation. The inky flak-bursts followed the pack, and Mark felt an occasional *thud* shiver the ship from a close burst. The death-blossoms trailed behind as they drove inland, and a few miles from the coast the blossoms were gone.

Ahead lay the snow-blanketed slopes of the Apennines with villages like eagles' nests on their sides. Mark stared down at the land. "Enemy," he told himself. If you had to bail out, these hillbillies would gut you and flay you and hang you by the heels in the market place. But you couldn't hate them for that. You could only figure that maybe you deserved it.

Cut the horse manure, fly-boy. This is business, and it's during office hours. That's the turning point up there, and there's hell beyond the mountains.

"BANDITS AT SEVEN O'CLOCK HIGH!" howled a sudden voice in the intercomm.

And an instant later, Sparley loosed a three second burst from the upper turret. Burnes got a burst from the waist, and then Mark saw the Focke-Wulf zipping down and turning sharply into a dive at about eight hundred yards, while two P-38s stabbed toward it. Another Focke-Wulf crossed like a flash in a pursuit curve aimed at the squadron just ahead and above. Bixby slashed at it with the flexible nose-gun, as it cut back and under, out of sight.

The interphone was yammering as Mark's crew stabbed out at the flitting falcons. He saw a plume of smoke trailing earthward about two miles away, but the range was too great to recognize it as friend or foe. One ship in the lead flight had a slightly chewed up

tail, but no ships dropped out of the pack.

Flak began bursting around the ship when they were still five minutes from target, and six Messerschmitts whipped out of the sun, screaming in slashing arcs across the rear of the formation. One went down, but a twenty-five began trailing smoke, fell from formation, one wing blazing. White silk puffs flowered beneath it. It fell into the blazing wing and spun earthward. The black death-flowers rocked the ship with their blooming, and Mark Kessel's nostrils quivered at the scent of cordite as the Prince ploughed through the smoke-balls of a steady barrage. The wolf pack waved and dodged. The wolf pack tumbled across the sky in seeming consternation, but the pattern lingered as in a frightened flock of geese. Ahead lay the city, and beyond it the marshalling yards, the arterial bulge in the long flow to the south. It was wide and hard to miss. And beyond the marshalling yards—the broad blue waters of Lake Trasimeno.

The lake, it reminded him of La. His scalp crawled, and his hands were fists on the controls. Surges sat smiling sourly at the flak bursts, chin propped on one elbow, smoking a lazy cigaret. Mark glared at him and cursed under his breath. Voices were tense on the interphone.

"Bandit, four o'clock low —

no, it's a Spitfire. One of ours."

"Hey! Flak heavy at one o'clock low, Pappy."

"Get a burst on this Focke-Wulf, Burnes."

"Goddam it, bomb bays open! The stupid bastard, he'll make this a long one!"

"*Rake him! Rake hell out of him!*"

"Bomb bays open, Pappy."

"Straight and level."

"Lead man's bucking for a Purple Heart."

"Shut up and watch your business!"

"Blow it, Pappy."

"Damn! Surges! Take it!"

"What's wrong, Pappy?"

"Just take it and shut up!"

Surges gave him a look and grabbed the controls. The wolf pack had plunged from fifteen to nine-thousand feet, and whipped toward the target with the instruments hugging the red-line. The crack of a bull-whip snapped through the ship as a shard of shrapnel stung the fuselage.

"That one bite anybody?" Surges called.

"Nope, nope. Goddam, get it over with!"

Mark Kessel sat panting, fists clenched and pressed together. She was with him now, for the first time she was with him, and her meanings, if not her voice came to him like a savage song:

"*Che brutto!* . . . How hateful you are. I hate you hate you hate

you hate you! You goddam murderer, you killed my mother! You wrecked my church, and you shattered my city, and now you come again! They'll get you, they'll rake you and rip you and slash you to ribbons. You gutless apes! *Che brutto!*"

She stood under the trellis with her fists clenched, her hair in the wind, ignoring the black hell in the sky that rained spent shrapnel over the city. Her breasts were sharp and proud and heaving. Her face was flushed with fury. Nearby, a frightened child was wailing.

He saw her, and she was with him like a scourge, and she knew that it was he. He swallowed a sick place in his throat and grabbed for his throat mic switch.

"Bixby! Close the bomb bays!"

"What's that, Pappy."

"Close 'em, goddam you!"

"Pappy, you're out of your head."

Mark cursed and grabbed for the salvo lever. Surges knocked his arm aside and slapped him hard across the mouth.

"Pappy! Get the hell out of here. You're blowing your top!"

Mark doubled his fist and drove it hard against the copilot's cheekbone. The ship fell out of formation as Surges dropped both hands from the controls and shook his head dizzily. Mark swung again, but Surges caught it on his shoulder.

Suddenly the muzzle of a forty-five jammed his ribs, and Surges hissed, "Damn you, Pappy, I'll blow your guts halfway to Naples. Sit still, or I'll kill you. We've got six men aboard."

He swung again. Surges let the ship go, jammed a foot against Mark's side, pistol-whipped him until the pilot fell bleeding against the side of his seat.

La, La! his mind whimpered.

The only answer was a tempest of hatred that engulfed him.

La, I couldn't know!

But he *could* have known. He had flown this mission before. He knew about the lake, and it was the same lake. He knew about her language and her mannerisms. He knew down deep — who she was, and where she was, and what she was.

Then he heard Bixby howl "*Finally!*" as the lead ship began toggling its bombs. One . . . two . . . three . . . and the Prince lost weight in gulps of five hundred pounds. He felt them leave the ship, and he wanted to dive after them. Looking back, he saw that the radio op had crawled atop the bomb bays for a sneak look through the hatch at the plummeting projectiles. The man was grinning. "*Bombs away!*" and the formation banked sharply.

I'll beat Burnes till his face is pulp, he thought. But *La* called out, *It's you, it's you, Marco, you foul coward.*

I'm not after your city, La! It's Jerry we're trying to kill! I can't help it, none of us can help it! For God's sake, La. For God's sake!

Yes, Marco, for God's sake.

He kept staring back at the city, waiting for the hell to break. Twenty four seconds after bombs-away, it broke. Thunder walked across the city and over the marshalling yards. Hell plumed up from a festered wound of five and belching dust.

La — La with your wind tossed hair and slender moon-blessed face, with your grace and your love and your laughter. La — La, in your plain stone house with gypsum floors and charcoal foot-warmers and coral virgins that look down from wall niches, a house of human birth and growth and death. La — La — it was us. I'm sorry. If I'd known. . . . He choked off, feeling the grinding pain.

If you had known, came a feeble whisper, would all be spared for the sake of one?

It stabbed him in a clenched belly, and it was mockery. He spat a shard of broken tooth from Surges' pistol-work, and he was sick. Because her question was demanded of a god.

No, Marco, only of men.

And the flak trailed away behind them, as did the last whisper of her consciousness.

He crawled out of the cockpit

and lay on the floor just forward of the bomb bays. He lay choking and panting and spitting blood. There was a black fog, full of fractured steel and bright red death that throbbed within it. There was fear, and the face of a woman. He was priest at a screaming ritual, and the dull blade bit a blue-fringed wound.

There was a rubble-heap where a bit of cloth was caught between broken stones, and a shattered wall where once had been a garden and a trellis. It was finished now, all finished.

"You can relax, Pappy, you're okay now."

"Man you're lucky, Pappy! They'll send you home right away. Hell, no need to finish those last four missions."

"Combat fatigue? Hell, Pappy, it could happen to anybody."

He was in the hospital. He sat up and looked around. There was Burnes, and Surges — hanging back — and Winters, and Bix, and Sparley. He shook his head and tried to remember.

La was gone. And her absence was sufficient proof that she had been there.

"It was a good strike, Pappy. We clobbered half the town."

He wanted to order them out. He got them out as quick as he could, but loneliness was no better. Why did it have to be La? And something answered: "Would you spare them all for the one?"

where the river? The earth has grown old, like a garment, and I alone am left, and I am lonely in a way that no Man can know or has ever known loneliness. Do not speak to me of kings and queens and of princesses, Man. I will not give her up."

Plainly, he would not. Vergil continued to talk, but his mind was now less on his words than on his thoughts, and his thoughts were on how he might overcome the Old One. It might be that his thoughts were read, or it might have been a caution of so long a standing as to have become habitual; however it was, the Old One had fixed him with his great golden eye, his huge and puissant eye, and gradually Vergil became aware that the gaze of this single eye was holding him, physically and metaphysically, at bay. He was not paralyzed, no, but whilst that great eye gazed at him and bathed him in its golden light, he could not loose the string of his bag of tricks.

And yet, how is the thought the father of the deed. For as he bethought him of the metaphorical bag and purse and pouch, his fingers toyed with the actual pouch hanging from his belt, and his fingers let slip its cord and his fingers delved therein. He could not have, even had he desired, got therefrom a knife (if knife had been there) nor lifted it against the Cyclops. What he

got, without hindrance, holding it unperceived, was so simple a thing as a coin. It had been fresh minted not long before he left, and, it being new to him, he had put it aside from spending it at once, as people do, preferring instead to pass the old and worn, familiar coins instead while they lasted. So this one bright coin remained. He tossed it.

He tossed it, not as one tosses a piece of money to decide a choice. He tossed it away.

The flash and glitter of it automatically drew the Cyclops's single eye away for a second—long enough for Vergil, released from the eye's power, to stoop and scoop up a handful of dust and toss it into that eye, that single, great and golden eye. And thus, to blind it.

Shouted, Cyclops. Laura cried out. Vergil turned and swept her up. He took her voice and his own voice, and cast them to the side. As he ran, with her in his arms, ran to the left, he heard his voice and hers coming from and dwindling down to the right. And the blundering, roaring Old One rushed with all four arms outstretched, now stooping and testing the ground, now striking his great and horny palms against the walls, down the wrong corridor, down, down, and away, following the fleeing voices; following the lying traitor, voices.

"Cyclops, farewell," she cried,

faintly. "I did like you, Old Cyclops. I liked you much—farewell!"

And, "Forgive me, Cyclops," Vergil heard his voice in the distance say; "but I have done thee less damage than the Grecian did thy brother Polyphemus—farewell—farewell—farewell—"

Eventually, but before his tears had washed his eye clean, the Old One learned, too late, of their escape. From afar they heard a great cry of wordless grief, aeons of loneliness made vocal...

Chapter 3

The Red Man was seated, slumped, upon the ground when they reached him at last. The journey had evidently wearied him much, much more than it had Vergil. Not until his blurred eyes focused on Laura did a flicker of interest show in them, and he slowly rose to his feet and prepared to mount.

After a time Vergil called out, "This is not the way we came."

The Red Man shook his head slightly. "... another route. ..." His words came, faintly over his shoulder.

"That's wise. We will avoid the Troglodytes this time, I suppose?" But no answer came. He rode alongside Laura, and spoke to her, but she had little to say. Her manner was as passive as ever. Indeed, she seemed so blank

and docile that Vergil felt a pang of doubt concerning his feelings for her. Could she really be little more than a lovely doll? Had her vigorous, dominant mother sapped and stunted her personality? Or was this merely a sort of protective shock?

Presently she was enough aroused to answer one or two of his questions—or, rather, to explain why it was she could not answer them. "I do not know why they took me from the Great High Road," she said, softly. "They said that Queen—that my mother had sent them, and they showed me a letter from her."

"A forgery, doubtless. But it is very strange . . . to have brought you so far, when convenient hiding places were so much nearer. One wonders why, for what motive. Ransom?" But Laura did not know. She gazed out of her mild and lovely wine-dark eyes on the passing desert. From time to time Vergil suggested a halt, but the Red Man pressed on. Sometimes he shook his head, sometimes he gestured ahead with his driving-stick, sometimes he did nothing; always, he said nothing. They had grown so gradually weary that it took some time for Vergil and Laura to realize that their present route had taken them quite definitely out of and away from the Sea of Sand. They were now and had been for some time in a

region of stones, the land slowly rising on all sides.

They were discussing this, in weary wonder, when Vergil observed that she had closed her eyes and pressed her hand to her temple. He drew his camel in close to hers and reached out to support her. "We must stop now," he called out. "The princess is very faint."

Without turning his head, the Red Man said, "We are almost there."

"Almost there?" Vergil felt anger rising over fatigue. "Almost where? I tell you, we must stop at once." But Ebbed-Saphir spoke only to the mounts, nor would they pause now for all of Vergil's urgings. It was a slight shift in the wind which brought tidings of what their eyes soon enough beheld. A perfume, a fragrance, as of some garden in Cyprus . . . he thought, at first, he dreamed . . . Then he saw it.

But it was no garden. Up, up past a wilderness of polished stones glittering in the fading sun like giant gems, the trail had led them, finally disembodying into a high plateau. And there, as large as a house, was a great pile of logs. Scented cedarwood and fragrant sandalwood and trees of myrrh and other odorous timbers of balsam and the like. Intricately carved and carpeted steps led to the summit, and a furnished pavilion.

A clap of thunder, a blaze of light, sounded and shone in Vergil's head. Fragments whirled and danced and suddenly, like pieces of a mosaic, came together in a visible pattern. "Man of fire! Man of Tyre!" he shouted as the Red Man dismounted and advanced. "Phoenician? No, not Phoenician alone, but—"

"—*Phoenix*—" said the Red Man. His face blazed with fiery light.

Not just a Phoenician, but a Phoenix! Not, indeed, the symbolic, metaphorical bird of legend, but the actual being itself. Gone, now, was all semblance of fatigue; all was joyful haste, as of a man going to a long-awaited tryst. The words poured forth from him. He, too, was old—if not so old as the Cyclops—but he was mortal, and his mortality indescribably wearied him. Up and down the world and to and fro, he had been coming and going for centuries: and now his time was at hand, had been at hand for these two years past. Only the fire could liberate him from the fretting, chafing shackles of his flesh, and, by its destruction of his present body, enable him to renew his youth.

The Sign of Regeneration, Vergil thought. *Eagle, Serpent, Phoenix*. . .

Aloud, he said, "If such is your need, Captain Phoenix, then

it is not for me to stand in your way."

But the other looked at him, teeth and eyes gleaming in his blazing face. "You? You are nothing but a path on which I tread. The Phoenix has no need for wizards."

"Then do what you must. Why you have brought me here, I do not at all know. Is it to kindle your pyre? The task belikes me not, but—"

Ebbled-Saphir laughed his brief scorn. "I have little time to enjoy the irony of it, but I have brought you here to pull, as it were, my chestnuts from the fire. I know the Cyclops hates me. I was not certain that you would succeed in rescuing my bride from him—"

"Your bride?"

The Red One nodded. "Yes . . . You spoke of my need. Little do you know of it, that you ask in such astonishment. Yes, *the Phoenix must have a bride!* And as the Phoenix is always male, he must take his bride from among the daughters of ordinary men. Our marriage, my marriage, the marriage of the Phoenix, is not an act of sex. No—only the union of male and female in joint presence and joint, simultaneous cremation and creation—only this can result in the formation of the so-called *Egg of the Phoenix* from which the new Phoenix will emerge. My bride!" he turned to

Laura, extending his hand. "My bride!"

With a gasp and a quivering breath, she drew back within the shelter of Vergil's arm and cloak.

"You need not fear. The pain is brief and slight, the joy is exceeding great: and in these our Wedding resembles weddings of mortality and flesh. Neither fear me nor disdain me, but come, surmount with me our matrimonial pavilion on the pyre . . . You still fear? I will be patient a moment more, but I have not forever."

Vergil said, as the setting sun cast its red reflection on the other's vivid face, "But why, Phoenix, out of all the world of women, have you selected *this* one woman? You see she does not wish it, nor should you wonder; but surely in all the world there must be at least one who would?"

The Phoenix said, "Come."

He extended his finger. Vergil, staring through the leaping flames which enclosed him like pickets and palisadoes, watched as Laura, fire-encircled, advanced numbly towards the Phoenix. Who held out his hand. And she took it. Together they approached the pyre.

The Phoenix turned. "Farewell, Wizard," he said.

But now it was Vergil's finger which moved, moved in a motion contrary to that of the Phoenix,

moved widdershins. And the fire blazing hot around him flickered . . . sank . . . sank . . . became a mere faint glowing circle on the ground. He stepped over it. Dumbly, the Phoenix stared.

"Phoenix of Phoenicia, I, too, have been in Phoenicia. Student of the secrets of fire, you see that I have studied the secrets of fire as well as you. *But I studied them in Sidon and not in Tyre.*" A sound, half growl and half groan, came from the other's throat. Tyre, burned to rock and ashes; Sidon, still enduring.

Vergil advanced. The Phoenix turned to face him. "My powers are the opposite of yours, and are not always deemed as useful. It seems that all men love to start fire and to set all aflame. Few have sought fire-negative power. I am one of the few."

He staggered back. The night had exploded in flames in front of him. The rocks were fonts of fire. He flung out his hands. For a space about him there was an opacity, a blackness, and this spread. The fires hissed, fell back as though in pain. The rocks spat like griddle-pans. A steamy vapor was seen in the air, and an unseasonal dew distilled upon the ground. Lightnings flashed and writhed, were quenched by rains. Fiery serpents large as pythons rushed upon him, met wet, black mists; the twain intertwined as if engaged upon some dreadful,

loveless copulation. The mists hissed, vaporized, grew thin. A cry of rage and triumph came from the Phoenix, he hurled out his fires, he blazed himself like a fire, he waved his glowing arms.

The mists thickened, became clouds, clouds and thick darkness; the air grew wet and thick and hot as a bath heated by a hypocaust. The nimbus-circled stars were obscured. The dark and steamy atmosphere was shot through with flames — white flames, blue flames, red and orange and yellow and green flames — but gradually there were less of them.

And eventually there were none of them at all.

Vergil shivered, his flesh chill and trembling in the cold wind. Strange how the scent of the spicy wood, warmed by the fire, now came fresh and strong. Outlined against the pyre, slumped and shrunken, was the enemy.

"Phoenix," said Vergil, "mount."

The Phoenix raised his head and drew in a breath and held it. He brightened, he blazed up, he glowed like a fanned ember. It was his last effort. Then, totally, suddenly, the light went out of him. Dull, dull and defeated, he seemed to hang there.

"Phocnix," said Vergil, "mount."

It was painful, almost, to watch how he more crawled than

walked up the carven stairs of the great pyre, how he dragged himself to one of the two furnitures there, half-throne, half nuptial couch.

Round and round about the pyre Vergil drew with his wand a great circle, and blazoned it with rays. "Now, Phoenix, hear my ban," he directed.

Within the circle of this sun

Shall no fire burn

Nor water run

Until my quest be won.

The cold moon rose and the strange rocks melted into shadows. Atop his cold pyre, the Phoenix stared, immobilized, motionless as a statue.

The camels, for once, seemed less than haughty.

Later, after a long and wearisome journey south and east—Vergil didn't dare to try to get past the hideous and treacherous Troglodytes, or the petromorphs waiting beyond them—alternately burned by heat and numbed by cold, he and the princess made their way down through Garamanteland and Outer Nubia, where they met a caravan which led into Meroe on Nilus. There they obtained places on the down-river packet-boat bound for Alexandria. And beyond that—after many delays—lay home.

End of Part Three

He had made no point either of informing Cornelia that he was going to Lybya or of keeping the information from her. He rather thought that she would have learned, though. Tulio they met in the villa's hall of entrance as Vergil swept in, the girl behind him. The seneschal's eyes and mouth opened wide at the sight, but a gesture and a glance from the magus sufficed to close them. A further gesture and a further glance, and Tulio meekly led the way.

Cornelia was occupying herself with small rectangles of ivory, parchment-thin, on which curious designs and pictures were limned in color, evidently by a skilled miniaturist. She had laid a number of them out in several even rows, and the rest were in one of her hands. "*Rota*," she murmured. "*Rato. Arot. Otar. Ator. Taro*—" She looked up and saw him and the pack leaped from her hand and scattered and fell.

"*Magus . . .*" she whispered. A girl sat on a low stool next to the table, the same servant-girl he had noticed when he first saw Cornelia, the day of the manticores. For a moment, as she saw him, as she saw the girl who now entered behind him, it seemed that she—the seated one—would exclaim a word or two. But, quick as he observed this,

much as he had startled and shaken Cornelia, the Dowager Queen was quicker; quick to recover self-possession sufficient to place her hand on the shoulder of the seated girl . . . whose face set in composure . . . but whose eyes fell.

Now Cornelia arose and faced Vergil and his companion. One brief moment her eyes, filled with joy and triumph and malice and passion and awe, met his. Then she embraced the girl he had brought and, closing her eyes, rocked to and fro. Then she released her. The girl had yielded to the embrace, returned it passively.

"I will not ask now what had happened, or where you have been. I am too full of emotion. Besides, it is of no importance compared to your return. What a welcome we shall prepare for you, daughter! But—now—oh, let us be alone together!"

She put her arm around the girl and started to lead her away. The other girl had already turned her back and now made as though to precede them.

"Madame—"

"Only a few moments together, Magus. You can understand. And then—"

"Madame—"

She sighed, and turned around. "I can refuse you nothing," she said.

"It is of my reward, indeed,

madame, that I wished to speak."

He felt he had no reason to doubt her sincerity when she said, "It may be anything you ask, any price you choose to set. Money, jewels, in any amount. This villa, if you like, or my dower-lands in Carsus—even the estates which are my patrimony from my great-grandfather the August Caesar—anything . . . anything at all . . ."

He bowed his head. Then, "These are noble offers, Madame, but my heart desires none of them. May I tell you what it *does* want?" Cornelia nodded. Vergil said, "Nothing but the gift of that servant-maid"—he held out his hand towards her.

Cornelia's face went livid. Then it blazed in anger. She lifted her hand as though to strike. Then she regained control of herself. "I ask your pardon," she said, with an effort. "You have done me . . . done us . . . a service which is almost beyond price. But, I must repeat, only *almost*. The . . . servant-girl . . . has been with us since she was born. She is like one of our family. In fact . . . I need not lie to you, you have eyes to see that she is of our very blood. It would be impossible to dispose of her as if she were a common servant, or slave."

"I understand and I respect your reasons. Then I urge you to send for the lictors without de-

lay and let the Phrygian cap be placed on Phyllis's head, and when she is freed, my word upon it, I shall marry her. Am I unworthy to wed a freedwoman?"

Cornelia was now fully composed. "Far from it, Magus," she said. "It would be a condescension on your part. Child," she asked, "do you wish to accept the honor which Doctor Ver-gil offers you?"

The girl said, in a low voice, "No . . . I do not wish it . . ."

Cornelia shrugged slightly and spread her hands a bit. "You see. There is too much devotion. What would you? Surely not to force her."

His head sank upon his chest. Then, after a moment, he said, "As I cannot look down, then I must look up. Lady—" he addressed the girl beside him, "would you, despite the differences in our stations, would *you* be averse to considering me as a suitor?"

The Queen raised her eyebrows at this, but no more, and looked at the other girl as if awaiting an answer which could only be a negative. And when the other girl said, "I? Oh! No . . .," the Queen began to nod her approval, only to stare in incredulity as she went on to say, "No, I would not . . . be averse to considering it."

Having had (it seemed so long ago) examples of and experiences

with Cornelia's anger, he was aware that her wrath had barely begun to stir when she said, swiftly and severely, "You forget yourself, wizard. There may be daughters of royal and imperial lineage who would be permitted to wed you — though I doubt it—but mine is not one of them. Never would I permit, never would my son, her brother the King of Carsus, permit it. Other arrangements are being made," once again she mastered her emotions, smoothly turned the apparent rebuff into something softer; "arrangements involving (I cannot say more) someone of very high station. So my daughter's guardians could hardly permit it to be said that we have broken our word. Great as your powers are, they are not great enough to force us into a breach of promise. You understand."

Had she not by now smelt the fox? suspected what this was all about? Very probably. For the moment, though, he was sure, she would go on playing the game, if only to see where it led. Indeed, she had little choice. Her eyes glittered watchfully as he nodded, plucked at his lip, uttered the light exclamation which indicated an idea. "'My powers,' yes, Madame. There we have, I think, the answer." Before Cornelia could interrupt or interfere, he reached out, pulled one girl

towards him and pushed the other away from him. Then he raised his arms and began a counter-incantation. It was not a long one.

"Henceforth," he said, concluding the 'spell', "She who was known as Laura shall be known as Phyllis; she who was heretofore called Phyllis shall be called Laura. I adjure you to speak nothing but the truth. *You—*" he pointed to the "servant-maid". "Who are you?"

"Laura," she said, confused and a bit frightened.

"So. Laura. Not Phyllis. Then if you are Laura, *she* must be Phyllis. So. Hm. Curious, is it not, Madame, that all the while you and I and all of us were so engaged in fashioning a major speculum to locate Laura, Laura was here? It is *most* curious. Indeed, I know not how to account for it at all . . . unless someone (I know not who for sure) had persuaded the true Laura to play a perjured part and had caused the true Phyllis to be so bewitched as to deceive both herself and others."

Cornelia stood as still and silent as one of the ancestral statues round about the room. Indeed, no one moved as Vergil spoke on. "Suppose this to be true," he said. "In that case we must construct a hypothesis to account for it . . . and in order to do this it will be necessary to look back

over the past. Forgive me—Madame—and maidens—if I seem to look too closely for complete comfort. It is essential."

Cornelia was the daughter of Amadeo, the late Doge of Naples. He'd had no sons, to his sorrow, on either side of the blanket. But it was known that he'd had another daughter, by a woman of the servants' quarters, and she—Cornelia's half-sister—had gone off with the legitimate daughter in the entourage to Carsus. Where she had, inevitably, attracted the attentions of that comely, weak and amorous man, King Vindelician. To whom, nine months later, she bore a daughter of her own, named Phyllis.

"What happened to the mother of Phyllis, Madame? Do you know? It is said that she died very suddenly very soon after the child's birth, which was not long after *your* child's birth. There are even those who have mentioned the word *poison* . . ."

Cornelia did not move.

The child Phyllis was therefore half-sister to the child Laura, daughter of the same father; more, she was the daughter of Laura's mother's half-sister, grand-daughter of the same grandfathers, double-cousin. It was no wonder that the girls so closely resembled one another, and more and more closely as they grew older. It was no wonder that, although Phyllis was sup-

posed to be Laura's servant, they had grown up as close friends, traded clothes and jewels . . . though of course Laura had so much more of each . . .

Neither child knew anything of any compact made before their own births, in secret. It was said that such had been made between a woman and a Phoenix in return for the promise of a throne. This compact was for long a source of hope and strength and joy—and then the note fell due before it was expected to, and it had to be paid. Or—did it?

"Suppose the woman who was the promised bride of the Phoenix was a woman of extraordinary powers. She would thus be able to set up wards and guards . . . but even so, always, always, there was the fear and terror that they might slip down. More: this woman would be in constant agony for her daughter, lest the Phoenix claim the child in place of the parent. Do you see?

"What should she do? What *could* she do? Let us hypothesize, assuming that this woman be you, Madame. What could she do? Why, she could have her daughter, Laura, come with her from Carsus, disguised as Phyllis, the servant. Whereas Phyllis, enchanted into believing that *she* was Laura, would come along later. This might be done in hopes of the Phoenix's doing what he

did in fact do: have the wrong girl kidnapped. In this way both the hated lover and the hated servant would be gotten rid of together on that far-off pyre, where no mystic union would occur at all, but only a painful death by fire. There was no way of knowing that the Troglodytes would waylay the Phoenix's hired kidnappers or that Old Cyclops would rescue Phyllis or that the Phoenix would fear to face him and take her.

"But when the Phoenix, guised as a mere Phoenician, appeared in Naples, it was obvious that something had gone wrong. He came, he went, the uncertainty must have been agonizing. If my hypothesis be correct, Madame, then your anxiety, your intense desire to fashion the major speculation, was not any fear that the false Laura had come to harm, but that she had not . . . That is my hypothesis."

Cornelia said only, "It is false."

Vergil shook his head. "I fear me, it is not. I myself first observed the true Laura my first day here at the villa, posed as a servant—it was the fact that she was holding unfinished embroidery copying the design on your ring—mate, as I later observed, to the Red Man's ring—a phoenix sejant upon a pyre—which caught in my mind.

"Do you know whither I had gone to find the pseudo-Laura,

Madame? To *Lybya*! And do you know from what I rescued her?" Abruptly, he dropped his pose, politeness; all. "Admit it!" he cried. "You do!"

Her face twisted to a horrible mask, her hands like talons clawed the air.

He shouted that it was not merely deceit, it was attempted murder. And this was like the mallet-blow struck the lever of the catapult. Cornelia cursed him. She cursed the formal, liturgical imprecations of Latin, Etruscan, and Greek. She shrieked things which (by Laura's wincing) could only be maledictions in the tongue of Carsus. And then, like a veteran fishwife, she flung the foulest phrases in the Neapolitan dialect at him, cursing him with her words, her spittle, her very gestures. Attempted murder? She only wished that it had succeeded! The girl, she screamed, was a bastard and a bastard's child — ill-hap and nothing else were the two of them to Cornelia and to Cornelia's mother — mirror-images, the one of the other —

"Why did I spare her life? I should have drowned her like a mongrel pup at birth! I saved her for this — for this — only for this! Why should she live and I die? I was promised five hundred years of life; should I not even live out my normal span, and this whore's daughter survive me? *No! No! No!*"

Her rage grew more and more uncontrollable and unthinking, surpassing anything that Vergil had ever seen. "But I will destroy her yet!" she shrieked, foam forming on the corners of her lips, her hair torn by furious hands from its careful folds and now seeming to writhe like a gorgon's, the ointments and paints so carefully applied to her face running and smearing from the tears and sweats of rage, her voice thin and high and trembling; all was ugliness and desperation. "I will destroy her yet! And you! And you! Wizard! Conjuror! Necromant! Mountebank! Bawd and purk and pimp! I will destroy you, too!"

Vile, vile, violent and vivid were the threats which now poured from her pale and cracked lips. She paused to draw a shuddering breath. He said, "My quest is won. I leave you now forever. Phyllis, come." He turned and, holding the shaking girl by the arm, strode quickly away.

He had not stepped a dozen steps when a fearful scream behind spun him around. Cornelia stood where he had left her — but now she was wrapped in flames. So unthinking was her rage that she had let slip all her wards and barriers, so that with this, and Vergil's equally unwitting removal of the ban pronounced before the pyre, the Phoenix, across the leagues and

leagues of land and sea, had claimed his bride at last.

It had been useless for Vergil to try to counter those furious flames. He might as well have attempted to prevent the blaze which follows the conjunction of the terebolem, those male and female fire-stones. Yet, strange, it seemed that the Phoenix had been right; likely that single scream was one of fear, for she seemed to feel to no pain; indeed, while the fire endured and made its great, deep sighing sound, her face grew calm and her eyes closed upon the world, wrapped and rapt in flames she stood there. Then the fire was gone and only a handful of ash, no more, stood where it and she had been.

The screaming servants had fled, who knows what story to spread abroad. Laura lay upon the couch, her face buried in her arms. Vergil sighed and shook his head, and Phyllis leaned against him.

But Tulio knelt upon the floor and sobbed and wept.

Finally he said, as though to himself, "She wanted a kingdom and she wanted an empire. It wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth it..."

(Later, to Clemens, Vergil said, "What she really wanted was immortality." "Vain quest . . . for her," Clemens answered. "Only alchemy can hope to provide it.

You know that." "I don't know that I do... What was it which first brought me to her? It wasn't jewels which I was seeking among the manticores that day. The child they stole — everyone knows the story — and kept a captive for so long — it was a hundred years ago, but he is still alive and looks much less than half his years . . . She had great gifts, Cornelia. We might have done things together. It is too bad, too bad . . .")

Yes, they might have helped one another, Vergil and the Lady Cornelia, if things had been far different. But, and meanwhile, there were other things to see to. For example, Laura. And Laura, free now forever from her scheming, dominating mother, what did she want for herself? Certainly not the chronically philandering Emperor, for whom her mother apparently had intended her, as a way of gaining indirect power over the throne. No, she wanted, first of all, her home in hill-girt, craggy Carsus, confident that there, among her brother's lairds, she'd find a husband to her taste.

"It's so flat and bland here," she summed it up. "Won't you be glad to get back, Phyllis? It will be quite different now. Brother can have you legitimized — I'll *make* him! — and we can fix up the old summer palace and live there together. I'm sorry about all this, but it wasn't my fault, I didn't know about all this wicked

magic and all that; besides, well, *you know Mother*; what could I do? But now we can have all kinds of fun and change clothes as we used to and pretend... Well, maybe not. But, anyway, Phyllis..."

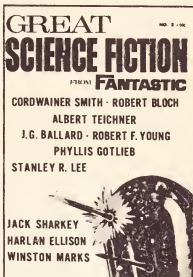
There was no doubt that Phyllis made her royal sister-cousin seem rather flat and bland herself. Vergil glanced at her while Laura chatted on, and he knew as he read the glance with which she

answered his, that Phyllis was not going. Not to Carsus, anyway.

His soul had been captured again, it seemed. But this time without pain. Clemens might growl and grumble at the presence of a young woman in the strange, high house on the Street of the Horse-Jewelers. But the gift of the two old books of Eastern music he had always coveted would still even Clemens' grumbles.

The End

NOW ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS



Betelgeuse, in Orion: The "Walking Cities" of Frank R. Paul

When Frank R. Paul, the "Dean of Science-Fiction Artists," died in 1963, Hugo Gernsback said of him: "Paul had an uncanny gift of reading my mind and translating my most abstruse ideas into masterpieces of art." And for more than thirty-five years, all his many fans came to realize just how well the first great science-fiction artist served the first great science-fiction editor, but they also saw—quite early—that Paul did some fascinating scientific thinking on his own—as you can see in his idea of "walking cities" that might be found on a planet that could just possibly be circling the giant star Betelgeuse, in Orion. Besides reproducing that example of Paul at his best (see our front cover), we also think you will be interested in the explanatory matter that went with it—primarily because it throws further light on just how much preliminary thinking went into making a Paul cover, the kind of artwork eminently worth rescuing from the Pulps that have passed.

BETELGEUSE is one of the twenty first magnitude stars. Its magnitude is 0.9; its right ascension is 5.9; its declination + 7.4; it is on meridian at 8 PM on Feb. 15; its radial velocity is + 21.0; its distance is almost 250 light years; its luminosity is 1,000 times that of the sun; its volume is 27,000,000 times greater than that of the sun; it is a Class M star, which means its temperature is of the order of 3,000°; its color is red owing to strong

absorption of the blue end of its spectrum; its angular diameter is 0".047, and its linear diameter is 260,000,000 miles which would fill almost the orbit of Mars; its mass is about four times that of sun; its density is 1/10,000 of that of our atmosphere at sea level; its spectrum contains strong bands of titanium oxide; it is a star in the constellation Orion, who was a giant and mighty hunter, who with a club in one hand and a lion's skin in the

other, faces Taurus the Bull.

Less technically, Betelgeuse is a giant sun about which we know a great deal, and it is entirely possible that it should have a family of planets just as does our sun, and is perfectly capable of sustaining life upon them.

Artist Frank R. Paul has envisaged such a planet in his excellent painting on this issue's cover. He has brought out several subtle points which can be analyzed.

First, he has pictured a planet inhabited by what we may assume to be quite advanced beings insofar as mechanical science is considered. In so doing he has expressed the opinion that this planet is an exceedingly old one. We arrive at this deduction from scanning the facts we have outlined at the opening of this article—for it would take many ages for a giant planet to cool sufficiently to allow life forms, due to its proximity to a sun so huge and so hot. Too, the civilization of the life forms would develop slowly due to the slow rate of cooling. Thus we may easily say that the civilization pictured here is millions of years old. One thing we notice from Paul's creations is that in spite of their long period of existence, they have not discovered the principle of the wheel, as it is applied to forward motion, but have discovered the principle as

applied to moving joints and parts. This is a commentary on civilized development all over the universe which would serve to show the great variety of differences in mechanical advancement that might be encountered simply because all ramifications of a simple idea might not be hit upon.

Although Betelgeuse, as a whole, is very much less dense than our atmosphere, Paul's planet is pictured having an atmosphere very much like our own. This would indicate that the planet is not much larger than our own, and probably has the same gravitational pull. On this basis, we assume that the people of this planet are of human stature.

We know that the planet (at least the area shown) is semi-tropical, from the vegetation, and from the fact that the inhabitants go about unclothed.

Water, clouds, rainfall seem about as normal as Earth's and the terrain is both mountainous and flat, with here and there evidences of volcanic activity seen in the presence of craters much like those seen on our moon.

However, here the resemblance to Earth stops. The people of this planet have never lived together in the Earth conception of a city. They have established no dwelling places whatever. In-

stead, they live constantly in the two-legged vehicles pictured, migrating from place to place in bands much as does a primitive tribe, and establishing a "camp" when wanted, simply by lowering the machines down to the ground on squatted legs. These are their "cities."

Apparently they are the only race on this planet, since they are unarmed, and their walking homes do not appear to be armed. They proceed without scouts, seem to fear no danger; thus it is logical to assume that none exists. Instantly we see why—

On this planet, civilized life has advanced at such a slow rate, due to the conditions of cooling, that struggle never became a part of its progress. It

is a lazy world where no being struggles against another. Here we would find a philosophy impossible for us to understand. It may be that the inhabitant of this world grows to maturity solely to become one of the wandering tribe, largely irresponsible, oblivious of the portent of passing time, and unambitious, driven only through the necessity of occasionally replacing his simple machines to continue his nomad existence.

He has no culture in our concept of the word. His is a moving civilization which builds no libraries, no permanent works. His planet's slow metabolism is a shackle on his climb up evolution's ladder.

THE END

WATCH FOR

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On Sale March 24th

LETTERS

Dear Editor:

After having read two issues of each of your magazines, I feel that it is about time that I write. Since I am in Germany, I do not receive new magazines until they have been out in the States for several weeks, so my comments may already be out of date.

I am very happy to see that *Amazing* and *Fantastic* are again rising back to the top.—Of your new stories . . . the best was the first part of "Axe and Dragon" by Keith Laumer. If the rest of the story continues like the first part, you have a real masterpiece on your hands. If you can print new stories of the average quality of these for the next year, I will look forward to seeing your name on the Hugo ballot.

—In the October *Amazing* there was a letter suggesting that *Fantastic* be converted into a pure fantasy magazine. Well, here is one reader who is all for it. You have printed both basic types of fantasy in your first two issues. "Stardock" for the swords and sorcery, and "Axe and Dragon" for the "de Camp" type. This would give you a chance to reprint, if you must continue to use reprints, many of the "Conan" and "Gray Mouser" stories. I would sincerely like to see you put it up to your readers and see what they say.

Martin F. Massoglia, II
c/o Col. Massoglia
Hq V Corps
APO New York 09079

● *Maybe there's a third type of basic fantasy—the "historical," an exotic mixture of lore and legend—the kind of thing Avram Davidson has done to perfection in "Phoenix and the Mirror," our lead story for this time. — Editor.*

Dear Editor:

Amazing/Fantostic changed hands while I wasn't looking, but the surprise

has been a pleasant one. Of course the blaze of glory—the number of big-name stories—coming with the first batch of issues is to be expected; good business practice and all . . . But so long-lasting! The reprints are well-chosen, too. I sincerely hope (admittedly with mixed motivation) that *Amazing* and *Fantastic* remain at the tops of their respective fields.

Jack Egan
218 W. Ligustrum
San Antonio, Texas

● *We'll keep the "big names" coming, but we also want to see new blood in these pages.— So get busy, all you future authors of Fantastic. Let's see some of the stories that will make you the Leibers and Loumers of tomorrow.— Editor.*

Dear Editor:

In the January, 1966 issue of *Fantastic* the story which held the most appeal for me was Robert Sheckley's "What a Man Believes." It really "rang the bell" for me!

Being an "old-timer" when it comes to reading odd, strange and different stories, I feel I am qualified to judge a story pretty well . . . and having read thousands of manuscripts during my lifetime (I'm head of the R.I. Writers' Guild here in Providence, R.I., and I'm almost 70 years old!), I don't mind adding a few more "unbelievable tales" while I'm still alive! Robert Sheckley truly made an "unbelievable" tale BELIEVABLE!

My husband and I were bosom friends of the late weird writer, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who died March 15, 1937, in our city, and who lies sleeping in beautiful Swan Point Cemetery. One night, after reading an especially weird manuscript aloud to us, he remarked that he believed the human brain was practically indestructible. . .that (who new?), the brain MIGHT keep on functioning even after death. . .at least, it was a

subject worth thinking about!

His remark has haunted me for years. Every time we visit Lovecraft's grave, I think about it, and I wonder if, after death, it is ever a possibility that the human brain MIGHT keep right on functioning. . . whether the heart stops or not. . . Sheer fantasy, I'm sure. . . or. . . is it?

To get off the subject. . . ALL of the stories in the January, 1966, issue are well worth reading. . . and of course Virgil Finlay's weird illustration of "Six and Ten Are Jahnn" is great. By the way, Virgil has also illustrated many Lovecraft stories. . . he's my favorite illustrator!

Many times I regret that H.P. Lovecraft died so young. . . he was only 47 at his demise. He'd be 75 if he'd lived. We cherish his memory and invite correspondence referring to H.P.L. and all weird, uncanny subjects! KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK and I'll continue to be a FANTASTIC FAN!

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy
Pres. R.I. Writers' Guild
688 Prairie Avenue
Providence, R.I. 02905

● Don't know—about the "indestructibility" of the human brain, but we're pretty sure Lovecraft left behind something more lasting than that—the Legend, which for some of us—especially since *Selected Letters*: I—has made the man as fascinating as his work.—Editor.

The Third Guest

(Continued from page 98)

very clean bones of the other half turkey were piled up in a meticulous fashion, which could only have been done by somebody who had enjoyed his meal with the profoundest of delight and the very greatest of satisfaction.

Dear Editor:

First, a belated 'thank you' for the September, 1965 issue of *Fantastic* containing Fritz Leiber's magnificent *Fafhrd/Grey Mouser* story "Stordock."

Actually my letter concerns Fritz Leiber's *Soga*: I consider these stories the finest *Sword and Sorcery* adventures since R.E. Howard's *Conan* myths. I have followed their adventures religiously since "Adept's Gambit" appeared in Leiber's *Arkham House* collection *Night's Black Agents*.

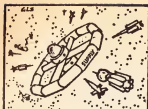
I sincerely hope that you'll become another *Farnsworth Wright* by fostering, in the pages of *Fantastic*, more new *Fafhrd* tales. Mr. Leiber certainly has the power and the gift to keep them alive. . . and I hope *Fantastic* can be their home. I mention *Wright*, incidentally, for his contribution to fantasy by fostering *Howard*, *Lovecraft*, *C.A. Smith* and many others who might otherwise not have found an appropriate audience.

As an old and faithful reader of both *Fantastic* and *Amazing*, I hope my request is seconded by many other fans of the great *Northlander* and his friend.

Dole L. Walker
4569 Skylark Way
El Paso, Texas 79922

● We second the motion and know all of you will join us.—So what about it, Mr. Leiber? You left *Fafhrd* and the *Grey Mouser* in the *Great Rift Valley* beyond *Stordock*.—Then what happened?—Editor.

Looking at these two piles of cleaned turkey bones, Macario's wife, thick tears welling out of her sad eyes, said: "I wonder—I just wonder who he had for dinner. Whoever he was, he must have been a fine and noble and very gentle person, or Macario wouldn't have died so very, very happy."



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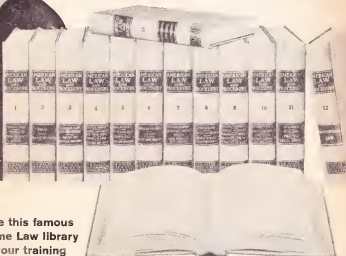
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